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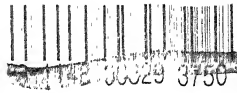
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The
MOFFATT
NEW TESTAMENT COMMENTARY
Based on *The New Translation* by the late
REV. PROFESSOR JAMES MOFFATT, D.D.
and under his Editorship

THE JOHANNINE EPISTLES

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THE JOHANNINE EPISTLES

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HARPER & ROW, PUBLISHERS

New York, Evanston, and London

THE JOHANNINE EPISTLES

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Printed in the United States of America

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PREFACE

IN studying the Johannine Epistles I have consulted various current commentaries, notably those of Rothe, Westcott, B. Weiss, Holtzmann, R. Law (*The Tests of Life*), Windisch, and A. E. Brooke, to whose admirable Introduction I am much indebted, although I sometimes come to different conclusions. The interpretation, however, which I offer here has in large measure emerged from studies primarily directed towards the understanding of the Fourth Gospel in its contemporary setting.

CAMBRIDGE,

January, 1945

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INTRODUCTION

I. THE JOHANNINE EPISTLES IN THE EARLY CHURCH

THE first clear evidence of the existence of any of these writings is afforded by Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna, who died as a martyr at the age of eighty-six, A.D. 155-6. Apparent echoes of the language of 1 John are fairly numerous in his work. Many of these however might be due simply to acquaintance with 'Johannine' ways of thought and speech, such as might be expected in one with Polycarp's background. We are credibly informed by Irenaeus (who knew him) that Polycarp had been acquainted with 'John' (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, V. 20. 6). But there is at least one passage which seems to go beyond this. It is in the seventh chapter of Polycarp's *Epistle to the Philippians*. The parallel passages are here given in a literal translation for the purpose of comparison.

Polycarp vii

1. 'Everyone who does not acknowledge that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh, is anti-christ; and whoever does not acknowledge the witness of the cross, is of the devil. . . .
2. Wherefore, leaving the futility of the many, and their false teachings, let us return to the word handed down to us from the beginning.'

1 John

- iv. 2-3. 'Every spirit which acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God; and every spirit which does not acknowledge Jesus is not of God; and this is the (spirit) of antichrist.' (Cf. ii. 22, 'this is antichrist.')
- iii. 8. 'He who commits sin is of the devil.'
- ii. 24. 'Let that which you heard from the beginning remain in you.'

Here Polycarp is saying the same thing as 1 John, and saying it in almost the same language, though somewhat more succinctly. It seems most natural to conclude that Polycarp was acquainted with our First Epistle. For the two lesser epistles Polycarp offers no similarly clear evidence. (See the careful display and assessment of the evidence in P. N. Harrison, *Polycarp's Two Epistles to the Philippians*, pp. 300-1.)

The date of Polycarp's work is unfortunately not precisely determined. There have been many attempts to interpret the

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apparently contradictory internal evidence. The solution of the problem offered by Dr. P. N. Harrison (in the work cited above) is that the so-called Epistle to the Philippians consists of two epistles of Polycarp to the same church, written at different times. One of them was apparently written within a fortnight or so of Ignatius's visit to him, which was in all probability A.D. 115. The other, in which our crucial passage occurs, must have been written later; but how much later, it is difficult to say. Dr. Harrison dates it about 135-7; but his arguments for so late a date are not conclusive. It might well be ten or fifteen years earlier. Indeed, there seems no cogent reason why the interval between the first letter and the second may not have been measured in months rather than years.

Next, Papias, Bishop of Hierapolis in the second century, made more than one quotation from 'the former epistle of John.' So Eusebius informs us (*Ecclesiastical History*, III. 39. 17), and we may accept the statement, since Eusebius had before him the complete text of Papias's work, which is now extant only in fragments. The expression 'the former epistle' would in a classical Greek writer imply the existence of only two epistles of John; but in the Hellenistic and Roman periods the comparative and superlative were frequently confused, and Eusebius has exactly the same expression in a context where he speaks explicitly of three Johannine epistles (*op. cit.*, III. 25. 2). We may take it that this is Eusebius's way of saying '1 John.' It implies nothing about Papias's acquaintance with either or both of the lesser epistles. It has been thought that the following passage of Papias contains a reminiscence of 3 John: 'I did not take pleasure, like most people, in those who . . . report alien commandments, but in those who report the commandments given to faith by the Lord, and proceeding from the Truth itself' (Eusebius, *op. cit.*, III. 39. 3); cf. 3 John 12: 'Testimony is borne to Demetrius by all, and by the Truth itself.' This is no very striking parallel; and as it occurs in a passage where Papias is glorifying oral tradition over against written documents, it might be naturally explained (so far as it can be said to echo specifically Johannine language) as the result of Papias's association with Johannine circles. For so much we may

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safely affirm about him, though Eusebius showed that there is no sufficient ground for accepting Irenaeus's statement that he was a 'hearer of John.' In sum, we may conclude that Papias cited our 1 John, and assume (*e silentio*) that he did not cite either 2 or 3 John, though that does not necessarily mean that he did not know them.

The date of Papias's work is again uncertain. Some would date it between 120 and 140: some between 140 and 160.

Thus our two earliest witnesses are less valuable than might have been hoped. We may say with certainty that 1 John was known in the province of Asia (to which both Smyrna and Hierapolis belonged) before the middle of the second century; and we may say with great probability that this date might safely be brought up to about A.D. 120-5 at latest, since there is no need to date any part of Polycarp's work later than this.

There are in other writers, some of them earlier than these, passages which have been adduced as echoes of the language of our epistles; but on examination they prove to be of a kind which could be sufficiently explained by the generally diffused tradition of apostolic teaching, or, it may be, by the specially 'Johannine' form of that tradition. They fall far short of presupposing an acquaintance with these particular writings.

It is only in the last quarter of the second century that evidence becomes really satisfactory. Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons (died about A.D. 202), quotes freely from 1 John, and also from 2 John, attributing both writings to 'John the disciple of the Lord,' to whom he also attributes the Fourth Gospel (*Adversus Haereses* [ed. Harvey], I. 9. 3, III. 17. 5, 8). Clement of Alexandria (head of the catechetical school at Alexandria about 180-202) frequently quotes 1 John and attributes it to the Apostle John (*Stromateis*, III. 5. 45). In the Latin *Adumbrationes* (supposed to represent extracts from the Greek *Hypotyposes* of the same author) there is a short summary of 'the Second Epistle of John' (expressly so-called), with the scarcely consistent statements that it was written (a) 'to Virgins,' and (b) 'to a Babylonian woman named Electa who signifies the Catholic Church.' We may suppose that the Latin translator (or adaptor) has been guilty of some confusion.

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However this may be, it is certain that Clement did know at least one epistle beside the First, since in one of his quotations from that work he cites it as 'the greater epistle' (*Stromateis*, II. 15. 66). In a correct Greek writer this would imply that Clement knew only two; and that is probably the case; but we cannot be sure that even Clement was immune from the common Hellenistic confusion of comparative and superlative to which allusion was made above.

The first known list of New Testament books is the so-called Muratorian Canon, which was made at Rome about A.D. 200, probably by the learned scholar and theologian, Hippolytus, dissenting Bishop of Rome about that time. The references to the Johannine epistles in this document are as follows.

(After giving an account of the composition of the Fourth Gospel, Hippolytus proceeds:) 'What wonder, then, that John so emphatically brings out the several points in his epistles also, saying in his own person, "What we saw with our eyes and heard with our ears, and our hands handled, these things we have written to you." Thus he describes himself not only as an eyewitness, but also as a hearer and writer of all the wonders of the Lord in order.' (Then, after dealing with the Acts and the Pauline epistles, he proceeds:) 'The epistle of Jude and two of the above mentioned John are reckoned among the catholic writings.'

The meaning of this surely is that Hippolytus recognizes as canonical two epistles of John, one of which is identified by his quotation as our 1 John. Some critics indeed have tried to secure his attestation for all three Johannine epistles, by assuming that after dealing with the First Epistle in connection with the Fourth Gospel, he then means to say 'there are two *more* epistles of John which are reckoned canonical.' That is a quite unnatural forcing of language. There are (he makes it quite explicit) two 'catholic' or canonical epistles of John. One of them he has already quoted for its bearing on the Fourth Gospel. Whether the other is our 2 John or 3 John remains uncertain. Since, however, Irenaeus, whose relations with Rome about this time were intimate, recognizes 1 and 2 John, but ignores 3 John, we may probably take it that these same

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two were acknowledged as canonical at Rome at the close of the second century. From that time on 1 John has a secure place in the Canon of the New Testament.

It is otherwise with the two lesser epistles. As we have seen, there is evidence of the existence of more than one Johannine epistle during the second century, and 2 John is definitely attested. Of 3 John there is no explicit mention until we reach the third century, and there is no clear citation from it until the fourth century. Origen of Alexandria and Caesarea (A.D. 185-254), who includes 1 John among canonical writings, and quotes from it, attests the existence of two other epistles, whose authenticity is doubtful (Eusebius, *Eccl. Hist.*, VI. 25. 10). This doubt long remained. Eusebius himself, in the early fourth century, while placing 1 John among the 'unquestioned' books of the Canon, relegates 2 and 3 John to the category of 'disputed' books (*op. cit.*, III. 25. 3). Later still Jerome, who himself accepted all three epistles as the work of the Apostle John, records that many attributed 2 and 3 John to a different author, John the Presbyter (*De Viris Illustribus*, 9, 18). By his time, however, all three were generally recognized as canonical in Greek and Latin Christianity, thanks largely to the authority of Athanasius. In the Syriac New Testament, on the other hand, none of them appear before A.D. 500.

As a curiosity of criticism, it may be mentioned that in the fourth century it was widely held that the First Epistle at least, and perhaps all three, were addressed to Parthia, and the title '*To the Parthians*' actually occurs in a handful of late MSS. This theory, though supported by so great an authority as Augustine, has no probability. It is difficult to conjecture how it arose. It is possible that it has some connection with the statement in the Clementine *Adumbrationes* (see p. xiii) that 2 John was addressed to a Babylonian lady (Babylon being within the territory of the Parthian Empire). But was Clement (or his Latin adaptor) thinking of 1 Pet. v. 13: 'She in Babylon elect together with you'? And is this perhaps the source of the whole 'Parthian' theory?

To sum up: 1 John has an established place in Christian tradition at least from the second quarter of the second century.

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It first emerges in the province of Asia, and is first quoted extensively, and attributed to John, by Irenaeus, a native of the same province. It is already included in the Roman New Testament of about A.D. 200. 2 John first appears in the last quarter of the second century, attributed to the author of 1 John, and is probably included in the Roman Canon of about A.D. 200. Elsewhere both its authorship and its canonicity were widely disputed down to the fourth or (in some places) fifth century. 3 John is first mentioned, as a writing of dubious authenticity, in the first half of the third century, and is not definitely admitted to the New Testament until about the middle of the fourth century—later still outside Greek and Latin Christianity.

The external evidence, therefore, for the two lesser epistles is late, meagre and unsatisfactory, especially for the Third. It should however be borne in mind that both are extremely short, and contain very little material for quotation. Critical questions fall to be determined largely upon the ground of internal evidence, and cannot profitably be discussed until we have examined the character and contents of the writings themselves (see, further, pp. lxvi sqq.).

For a full account of the patristic evidence the reader may be referred to A. E. Brooke's Introduction to his Commentary on 1-3 John (*International Critical Commentary*), pp. lii-lxii.

II. BACKGROUND AND SETTING OF THE FIRST EPISTLE

At the beginning of the Christian era there was a movement or tendency within paganism towards a purer, more reasonable and more inward piety. Its representatives often patronized traditional cults, particularly those known as 'mysteries,' and they invented or developed others; but its underlying assumption was that all religions come to much the same thing, if they are rationally understood. Its exponents offered ways of rationalizing most of the current rituals and myths. The movement covered a wide range. Near the bottom of the scale it was little more than a way of making superstition respectable for the minor *intelligentsia*. Near the top, it took form in a high religion of mystical communion with the Divine. Certain

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general assumptions can be recognized. The material world is evil. The rational part of man is a prisoner in it, and an exile from the world of light; in fact, in some way a separated part of the supernal world, an effluence, or radiation, of that eternal Light which is Reason, or pure Being, or God. By knowledge of the world of light, communicated in esoteric revelations or initiations of one kind or another, the rational spirit of man can liberate itself from its prison of matter and rise to the supernal world. It is then united or identified with, or absorbed in, the Divine.

Many variations were played upon this theme, all of them controlled by the central dogmas: the distinction between the realm of light and the realm of darkness which is the material world, and deification through supernatural knowledge (*gnosis*). The movement undoubtedly attracted many charlatans, but it also had exponents (like those writers who are responsible for the tractates of the *Corpus Hermeticum*) who display a pure and genuine mystical piety. In general, we may recognize in it the traits of a type of religion which recurs in many periods; laying stress upon 'enlightenment'; usually individualist and esoteric in temper; jealous of its 'spirituality' and disdainful of the material world, and of history.

When Christianity appeared in the Graeco-Roman world, it early came into contact with this higher paganism; naturally enough, for it too was a missionary faith aiming at the conversion and salvation of mankind through the revelation of God and communion with Him. On the one side, believers in a generalized religion, expressing itself in various mythologies and cults, readily welcomed one more cult, one more mythology, which could be added to the ingredients of the theosophical hotch-potch. They prepared to adopt Christianity as they had already tried to adopt Judaism. On the other side, enthusiastic but ill-informed converts to Christianity were eager to reinterpret the faith 'in terms of modern thought,' as we say. There are hints of attempts at assimilation already in the Epistle to the Colossians and the Pastoral Epistles; and the Fourth Gospel can best be understood as a brilliant attempt to undercut the whole process by a genuine and thoroughgoing

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reinterpretation, in which alien categories are completely mastered and transformed by the Gospel, and constrained to express the central truth of Christianity in universal terms. It was along the lines laid down in the Fourth Gospel that the problem was in the end successfully solved. But that is to anticipate.

At the end of the apostolic age, church history, it has been said, enters a tunnel. When it emerges, in the middle of the second century, we discover a central body which is the Catholic Church, surrounded by a medley of sects claiming in some sense the Christian name, and varying from recognizable though somewhat eccentric presentations of the Gospel, through various half-Christian or near-Christian systems of belief, to downright caricatures. Their names, and some account of their peculiar tenets, can be read in the pages of Irenaeus, Hippolytus and Epiphanius. To some of them ancient writers apply the term 'Gnostic,' and this has been adopted by modern writers as a general designation for all these would-be Christian heresies. Others apply the term to all systems of thought, with or without a tinge of Christianity, which teach salvation through *gnosis* or supernatural knowledge. It is equally appropriate to them all, and there are advantages in using in its widest denotation a term which brings out the common element in a great variety of religious beliefs. We need not however dispute over names. The facts are clear. What is not altogether clear is the process by which this situation came about, for the rise of heretical Gnostic sects took place during the 'tunnel' period.

The First Epistle of John appears to reflect a critical moment at an early stage in the process. It speaks of a group of Christian teachers who had gone wrong. They were not only teachers: they were prophets—'false prophets' our author calls them. He does not deny that they spoke by inspiration; only he is sure that their inspiration was not divine. As prophets, they must have been persons commanding respect and exercising authority in the Church. They began to teach new doctrines, and, presumably after failing to carry the Church with them, seceded, and continued their missionary activity in the pagan world. Their mission was successful. They

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found a wide hearing—indeed, a wider than the orthodox teachers could command. All this is told us in plain terms in 1 John ii. 18-19, iv. 1-6. The secession clearly gave the Church a harsh shock. We may conjecture that it may have been the first case, at least in this province, of a deliberate secession on doctrinal grounds, and the fact that it was led by prophetic men, respected and influential, to whom the laity had been accustomed to look as leaders, made the situation very dangerous. The fellowship of the Church was rent; the unity of belief and teaching was broken; the rank and file might well be disturbed and perplexed. It is to this situation that the epistle is addressed.

What then did these dissenters teach? All that we are told directly is that they denied the reality of the Incarnation. This denial was characteristic, we are told, of the 'Docetists.' But in fact any 'Gnostic' was bound to find some way to avoid the scandalous idea that the Son of God, the Revealer, the Intermediary between the Divine and the human, suffered the degradation of direct contact with matter, the embodiment of all evil; and above all he was bound to deny that the Divine could suffer. The false prophets therefore were certainly on the track which led to later Gnostic heresies. For their further tenets we can only proceed by inference. Our author attacks people who use (unworthily and untruly as he thinks) such language as, 'we are born of God,' 'we are in the light,' 'we have no sin,' 'we dwell in God,' 'we know God.' He is prepared to use such expressions, properly defined, in a fully Christian sense. It is their false and unworthy use that he reprobates. All the same, it is noteworthy that if such expressions cannot in all cases be exactly cited from Gnostic sources, they are certainly closely analogous to Gnostic language, and taken together describe well enough the best type of Gnostic piety (in the widest sense), with its intense spirituality and its claim to mystical experience—above all to that 'knowledge' of God which is the way to salvation and deification.

Our author also finds in his adversaries a neglect of Christian morality. Is this neglect to be called 'Gnostic'? Christian apologists of the second century charge the Gnostics with all

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manner of moral enormities. The pagans, we may recall, made similar charges against Christians, and Christians have been known to retort them upon the Jews. There seems however no reason to doubt that some of the heretics believed themselves to be so far above good and evil that their conduct scandalized even the easy-going censors of Roman society. Yet it would certainly be unjust to tar all Gnostics with that brush. In some Gnostic circles there is evidence of ascetic personal morals. When our author urges that those who cherish the Christian hope should 'purify themselves as Christ is pure,' some of his opponents might have applauded the sentiment, while adding that they could not understand how the Son of God could be described as 'pure' if He was involved in matter. It is, however, to be noted that our author, with a sure instinct, thinks of Christian morality as being from first to last a matter of obedience to the divine command of love or charity. It does not appear that charity plays any considerable part in the ethical ideals of Gnosticism, pagan or Christian. That type of piety went along with an individualism which had usually little sense of social obligations.

On the whole, then, there is good ground for concluding that the errors with which this epistle is concerned are associated with that tendency in the religious life of the time which is known as 'Hellenistic mysticism,' or 'the higher paganism,' or especially in its near-Christian dress, as 'Gnosticism.' Reference to writings in the Gnostic tradition will often illuminate passages in the epistle (as this commentary will attempt to show). In common with the Fourth Gospel, the First Epistle of John shows the influence of Gnostic ways of thought. It was not without reason that the Gospel according to John was welcomed in some heretical circles, and at first looked at askance by some ultra-conservatives in the Church. But both parties were wrong. The use of current religious phraseology and thought-forms serves only to bring out more clearly a radical divergence.

The religious quest of the Hellenistic world was not in vain. It attained some genuine religious insight; and it provided early Christian thinkers with an intellectual apparatus for interpre-

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ting Christianity to the wider world, and, in doing so, penetrating more deeply into the meaning of the Gospel. But the more openly the religious discussion was conducted upon ground common to Christianity and the best non-Christian thought, the more clearly did the specific *differentia* of the Christian faith emerge. Augustine, himself trained in a philosophy which was the fine flowering of the Hellenistic spirit, put his finger upon the point when he said that most of the statements made in the Prologue to the Fourth Gospel were already familiar to him from the writings of the Neo-Platonists; but one thing he could not find there: 'The Word was made flesh' (*Confessions* vii. 9). It was there that the issue was joined between two rival philosophies of life. And it was this issue that our author saw to be raised by the disturbing propaganda of 'false prophets' in the churches which he knew and for which he felt responsible. In all that he writes he has this problem in mind.

III. CHARACTER AND CONTENTS OF THE FIRST EPISTLE

The First Epistle of John (unlike the Second and Third) has no epistolary introduction or conclusion, such as we find in Pauline and other New Testament epistles, after the regular models of contemporary correspondence. It is not so much a letter as a somewhat informal tract or homily. It seems, however, to have been addressed, in the first instance, to a particular circle, rather than written for general publication. The situation in view is apparently local, and there is evident a certain warmth of intimacy between writer and readers. The tone of the work is that of a pastor addressing his flock. Yet no names or other particulars are given, to connect the work with this or that local church. It may perhaps be best understood as a circular letter, like 1 Peter and (probably) Ephesians, addressed to the churches of a whole region.

The argument is not closely articulated. There is little direct progression. The writer 'thinks around' a succession of related topics. The movement of thought has not inaptly been described as 'spiral,' for the development of a theme often brings us back almost to the starting-point; almost, but not quite, for there is a slight shift which provides a transition to a fresh

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theme; or it may be to a theme which had apparently been dismissed at an earlier point, and now comes up for consideration from a slightly different angle. The striking aphorisms which are the most memorable things in the epistle do not usually emerge as the conclusion of a line of argument. They come in flashes, and their connection with the general line of thought is sometimes only hinted at.

Any attempt to divide the work into orderly paragraphs and sections must be largely arbitrary, and will indicate only in a broad way the succession of topics. After separating off the exordium (i. 1-4) and the postscript (v. 14-21), we may regard the epistle as falling into three main divisions, to which the following headings may be supplied:

I. What is Christianity? i. 5 - ii. 28.

II. Life in the Family of God. ii. 29 - iv. 12.

III. The Certainty of the Faith. iv. 13 - v. 13.

Within this framework the argument may be summarized as follows, square brackets marking words inserted to bring out implied connections of thought, and round brackets the author's own parentheses.

'I am writing about that which is the theme of all Christian preaching and teaching—the Gospel, God's life-giving Word to man. Since the life of eternity was manifested in time by the incarnation of the Son of God, we can speak of it with an assurance based upon direct testimony to historical facts.

'My object in writing is to promote the threatened unity of the Church in this crisis of schism and apostasy (i. 1-4).

I

i. 'The main purport of the Christian revelation may be summed up in the familiar maxim, "God is light." Since light is an absolute, excluding darkness, fellowship with God must show itself in a life radiant with goodness, and free from all dark ways: in other words, a good life, free from sin. Only in such a life can Christian fellowship be realized.

'(Free from sin, however, not in the sense of a personal achievement of moral perfection—the claim to sinlessness

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made by some is a delusion—but free from sin by divine forgiveness and renewal mediated through the sacrifice and the intercession of Christ.)

‘Again Christianity offers [in the familiar phrase] knowledge of God; but it recognizes no such knowledge as genuine unless it shows itself in obedience to God’s commands.

‘And again, Christianity means union with God; but insists that such union involves moral conformity with His character as revealed in Christ (i. 5 – ii. 6).

2. ‘[To return to our starting-point—“light” and “darkness”; how fittingly the terms describe the contrast between the new order of life revealed in Christ and the old order which is doomed.] The new order is marked by Christ’s own “new commandment” of love, or charity. There is no genuine “enlightenment” apart from obedience to this commandment.

‘As Christians you are actually living within the new order, in which you possess forgiveness of sins, knowledge of God, and victory over all evil powers.

‘Over against this new order stands the pagan world-order, in irreconcilable opposition to God, and doomed to destruction. The Christian who loves God and obeys His will has no attachment to this doomed world, but belongs to the immortal order (ii. 7–17).

3. ‘The end of this world is at hand. We have been taught that it will be immediately preceded by the appearance of “Antichrist”—and Antichrist is here! For what else is this appalling apostasy, this denial of Christ and of the Father He reveals? The false teachers claim superior “enlightenment”; but there is enlightenment enough for every Christian in the simple Gospel which you received. If you remain steadfastly, and intelligently, loyal to the Gospel, you are secure in the truth, and can face the impending Day of Judgment with confidence (ii. 18–28).

II

1. ‘[Loyalty to the Gospel includes right conduct; and] right conduct is the sign that by God’s grace we have been born

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again as His children. Consider how much is implied in the Gospel assurance that God is our Father. It is, first, a proof of God's love for us. Secondly, it is a promise that we shall hereafter see God and be like Him. Thirdly [and this is the point I wish to emphasize here], it lays upon us the obligation to imitate the divine character as revealed in Christ.

'There is a stark contrast between righteousness (or right conduct) and sin (or wrong-doing), a contrast which no sophistry should be allowed to obscure. The Son of God, Himself sinless, came to abolish sin. The children of God, by virtue of a divine heredity, live a life over which sin has no power (ii. 29 - iii. 10).

2. 'I remind you again of Christ's own commandment: "Love one another." Hatred among brothers is a monstrous thing. It is pilloried in the bible story of Cain, the first murderer—for hatred is murder. Cain stands for the pagan world-order, which is the realm of hatred, and of death. We are living in the new order which is a realm of life; and the token is, that we love one another.

'What love, or charity, is, we learn from Christ's action in laying down His life for us. We are bound to imitate His sacrifice—even if it be only in the humble way of giving up what we have, to relieve a brother's need. In any case, charity is action (iii. 11-18).

3. 'It is only in the exercise of charity that we have solid assurance of our Christian standing before God; and if conscience is still uneasy, we may take confidence from the thought that God knows us better than we know ourselves. If our conscience is clear [as the conscience of a Christian should be], then we may live in frank and open intercourse with God, asking Him for what we need, and doing what He wills. To live thus is what is meant by union with God; and a token of this union is the gift of the Spirit (iii. 19-24).

'(The gift of the Spirit, however, may be counterfeited. There is false inspiration as well as true. The test lies in the confession of Christ as the incarnate Son of God. The false teaching which denies the incarnation is [as I said before] the mark of Antichrist. As the world-power of evil is already

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overcome by those in whom God dwells, so also is the false teaching, whose very success in the pagan world sufficiently indicates its pagan origin. The Church is God's family: its testimony is received by those who know God, rejected by those who are none of His. The former show the true inspiration, the latter the counterfeit) (iv. 1-6).

4. '[To resume:] love, or charity, is of divine origin, and those who practise it are children of God, and know God. In fact, God *is* love. His love is disclosed to us in the coming of Christ and His work of redemption; and that loving action of God's is the one ground of all love, or charity, among men. Clearly, then, the command to love one another is an inseparable consequence of the Gospel of God's love. There is no "vision of God" in this life; but there *is* real union with God: we have it when His love is freely active in our love for one another (iv. 7-12).

III

1. 'We have assurance of this union, [as I said before,] in the gift of the Spirit. But moreover, [though man cannot see God in His eternal being,] there is one thing we *have* seen—the coming of Christ, the Son of God incarnate, as Saviour of the world. To hold that conviction is to have union with God, for it is to be aware of His love. [I repeat:] God is love; to live in union with God is—to live in love. And living in love we need have no fear of the impending Day of Judgment; for we are already at one with our Judge; and love excludes fear (iv. 13-18).

2. '[To sum up:] we love, because He loved us first. The test for the reality of our love is simply practical charity towards our brothers. Unless a man loves his fellow (whom he has seen), it is idle to assert that he loves God (whom he cannot see). It is moreover God's own command [through the teaching of Jesus Christ] that in loving Him we should love our fellows, and love without obedience is meaningless. Through faith in Christ we are all children of God, "Love me, love my child," is a maxim applicable here as in ordinary

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human relations: if we love God, we must needs love our brother, who is His child.

'To love God is to obey His commands. [But surely, you will say, that is too hard for us. No:] it is not hard to obey God, because we are His children, having within us that divine quality of life which is victorious over the world. Our faith assures us victory over God's enemy, without us and within: the faith, I mean, which affirms that Jesus is the Son of God incarnate (iv. 19 – v. 5).

3. 'This faith we must hold in its fulness. Christ came, not only by the water of His baptism, [as the first great initiate,] but also by the blood of His cross, [as Saviour of the world]. In evidence, we have the testimony both of the Spirit [in the earthly ministry of Christ, and in the Church], and of the water [of His baptism, and ours], and the blood [of His cross, and of the sacramental chalice]. The witness is consentient, and it is the testimony of God Himself. It is, however, only in the act of faith in Christ that we appropriate the testimony to ourselves. To reject it is to give the lie to God.

'The sum of the testimony is this: that God has given us eternal life, in His Son: to have Christ is to live; to be without Christ is to be dead. I have written to you who believe, to assure you that you possess eternal life' (v. 6–13).

POSTSCRIPT

1. 'The Christian assurance of which I have spoken has an especial bearing on prayer. Prayer which conforms to the will of God is assured of an answer; and in particular prayer for a fellow-Christian who has fallen into sin (provided it is not mortal sin) (v. 14–17).

2. 'There are three things of which we can be quite certain: (i) the child of God is preserved from sin; (ii) we are God's children, in an evil world; (iii) through the incarnate Son we know the God who is utterly real, and being in union with Him we live the life of eternity. Knowing this, have nothing to do with unreal substitutes for God' (v. 18–21).

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The immediate aim of this epistle, as we have seen, is to meet a critical situation arising out of the preaching of a distorted form of Christianity. By way of meeting it, the author recalls his readers to the original springs of Christian belief; to that which you learned from the very beginning (ii. 24), the message you have learned from the very beginning (iii. 11), the old command which you have had from the very beginning . . . the word you have heard (ii. 7), in short, the 'word of life,' embodied in the primitive, apostolic Gospel (i. 1-3). That recall is a note that sounds all through, whatever may be the particular topic discussed in any passage.

It is not at first sight obvious to the reader that what the author is giving is in fact the common, original Gospel of primitive Christianity. His forms of expression certainly differ from those of most of the New Testament, and have a close resemblance only to those of the Fourth Gospel, which is admittedly a relatively late work, and one with a highly individual cast of thought and language. It will therefore be of interest to confront the teaching of the epistle with what we know of the early presentation of the Christian faith to the world.

About the character and contents of the primitive Gospel, at least in its broad lines, the New Testament leaves us in no doubt. The briefest possible formulation is that which Mark gives as a summary of the preaching of Jesus: 'The time is fulfilled and the Kingdom of God has drawn near. Repent and believe the Gospel' (Mark i. 15). How the Apostles proclaimed this Gospel in the earliest days we may learn from a comparison of *data* in the Pauline Epistles (the earliest surviving Christian documents) with the apostolic speeches in the Acts of the Apostles (which though written down much later agree so remarkably with the Pauline *data* that we must conclude they rest upon good and early tradition). The *kerygma*, or proclamation of the Gospel by the earliest preachers, may be summarized somewhat as follows:¹

¹ For the evidence, see my book *The Apostolic Preaching and its Developments*, Chapter I.

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The crisis of history has arrived; the prophecies are fulfilled; and the 'Age to Come' has begun.

Jesus of Nazareth, of the line of David, came as God's Son, the Messiah.

He did mighty works;
gave a new and authoritative teaching or law;
was crucified, dead and buried (died for our sins);
rose again the third day;
was exalted to 'the right hand of God,' victorious over
'principalities and powers';
will come again as Judge of quick and dead.

The apostles and those who are in fellowship with them constitute the Church, the New Israel of God, marked out as such by the outpouring of the Spirit.

Therefore repent, believe in Christ, and you will receive forgiveness of sins and a share in the life of the Age to Come (or eternal life).

The setting of this apostolic preaching is eschatological; that is to say, it presupposes the general scheme of Jewish belief in the providential ordering of history towards a final crisis in which God's purpose will be fulfilled, and His sovereign rule over the world will be demonstrated in judgment upon evil and in the redemption of men. The essential point in the *kerygma* is that the decisive step in this culminating act of history has already been taken. In the coming of Christ the Kingdom of God has come upon men for judgment and redemption; and consequently, in the Church, the new Israel of God, there exists a divine community enjoying within time and space the 'life of the Age to Come'; and the final consummation is impending, in which Christ will be manifested in glory as Judge and Redeemer to wind up the historical process.

It is clear that the author of this epistle lives fully within this eschatological faith, even though in many respects his expression of it differs from that of the primitive Church. He is aware of living at the moment of history in which, so to

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speaking, the two 'ages' overlap. It is the last hour of this age. **The world is passing away.** It is true that he never relates this conviction, as earlier writers do, to the Hebrew conception of history as the working out of a divine plan interpreted by the prophets. He never alludes to the fulfilment of prophecy, as he betrays virtually no interest in the Old Testament, and no acquaintance with the contemporary thought of Judaism. For him the two 'ages' of Jewish-Christian thought are the realms of light and darkness which figure in Hellenistic theology. **The darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining** (ii. 8). That is his characteristic way of restating the evangelical proclamation of the new age. The epithet *true*—more properly 'real,' as in John i. 9—in itself betrays the philosophical background of his thought. He speaks of the 'real' light in a quasi-Platonic sense; that is to say, the eternal or archetypal light ('the light that never was on sea or land'); the light of which all visible lights are only suggestive symbols; the **real light** which in John i. 9 is identified with the Logos, the eternal Principle of creation and revelation. But the realms of 'light' and 'darkness' do not here represent, as for Hellenistic thinkers in general, a static map of the universe in its several planes. The darkness fades, the light dawns: there is movement and change; something is *happening*. What our author means is that a divine action has taken place which profoundly alters the character of human existence in this world: a new dispensation, a new order, has been constituted by act of God; and *this* is the realm of light, within which Christians live, even while the pagan world continues (not for very long) to live in the old order of darkness.

If he is indifferent to the historical antecedents of the act of God as expressed in prophecy and its fulfilment, he is very much alive to the historical actuality of the events in which that act of God was manifested. As in the primitive Preaching, so here, the passage from the age of darkness to the age of light was effected by the coming of Christ. In the simplest terms he affirms, **We know that the Son of God has come** (v. 20). In eschatological prediction the Messiah (or God Himself as Judge on the Last Day) is '*the Coming One*' (see Heb.

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x. 37, citing the Greek of Hab. ii. 3; Matt. iii. 11). In the apostolic Preaching Christ is He who *has come*. The change of verbal form is significant. Another way of stating the same fact is to say that Christ was 'sent' (iv. 9, 14). This is a form of expression especially congenial to 'Johannine' circles, but it has primitive origins, as may be seen from the coincidence of Pauline language with that of the Gospels (cf. Gal. iv. 4; Rom. viii. 3; Mark ix. 37). He adds statements of the purpose or effect of the coming of Christ expressed in distinctively 'Johannine' language (iii. 5, 8, iv. 9). The form of expression nevertheless recalls several statements in the Synoptic Gospels about the coming of Christ and its purpose (e.g. Luke xix. 10; Matt. xx. 28; cf. also Matt. v. 17, ix. 13, etc.). Again, in ii. 22 we have a clear echo of a very primitive confession of faith: **Jesus is the Christ** (cf. Mark viii. 20). In iv. 15 this takes the alternative form, **Jesus is the Son of God**, which is also primitive (cf. Mark iii. 11, v. 7, xiv. 61-62, xv. 39; Matt. vii. 29, xiv. 33, xvi. 16; Rom. i. 3-4, etc.).

In all this our author keeps closely to the forms of the primitive Preaching. But the development of Christian theology, and the emergence of 'Gnostic' versions of Christianity, made it necessary to elaborate this clause of the *kerygma* so as to preclude erroneous interpretations. Some teachers asserted that the Son of God, the eternal Christ, had indeed 'come,' in a sense, but only by taking on the temporary appearance of a man (much after the fashion of the 'theophanies' which Jews and Gentiles alike believed in). The actuality of the events on which the Gospel rested was thus denied, and the unique connection of the eternal with history, which was the presupposition of the proclamation of a new order, was destroyed. Hence the simpler confessions of faith needed to be restated in the form '**Jesus Christ has come in the flesh**' (such is the literal translation of iv. 2). To deny this is to deny the Gospel (iv. 3). It is because of the vital importance of this conviction of the actuality of Christ's human life that the writer appeals so emphatically to the evidence of the senses in i. 1-3.

Of the mighty works of Christ, 'in the flesh,' to which the

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kerygma seems to have alluded (Acts ii. 22, x. 38), our author has nothing to say: it was hardly germane to his purpose. On the other hand, he is insistent upon the authority of His teaching. It is doubtful how far this point was generally included in the *kerygma*. Only the form given in Acts iii. 22 expressly indicates Christ as the second and greater Moses, prophet, teacher and lawgiver. This comparative silence, however, must not be misunderstood to mean that the primitive Church was not interested in the teaching of Jesus. It is evident from the whole New Testament that the message of the Church was conceived as having two main aspects: the Gospel of Christ, the theme of preaching (*kerygma*), and the Law or Commandment of Christ, the theme of teaching (*didaché*). (The distinction was partly a matter of method and of ministerial organization.) The Gospel of Christ is essentially a declaration of what God, in His grace towards man, has done through Christ; the Law of Christ is a statement of what God requires of those who are the objects of His gracious action. The two are intimately united, though distinguishable. The distinction and the relation between the two appear in the structure both of the Gospels, which interweave the story of Jesus and the record of His teaching, and of the Epistles, several of which are divided into a 'theological' part, expounding the implications of *kerygma*, and an 'ethical' part, developing and applying the Law of Christ (so Romans, Galatians, Ephesians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, Hebrews—with an attenuated 'ethical' section—and 1 Peter).

In the First Epistle of John there is a thorough integration of the Commandment and the Gospel. Whether one says that the teaching of Jesus is a part of the Gospel, or that the 'word of life' (i. 1) includes inseparably both Gospel and Commandment, the unity of the two elements in the Christian message is complete (see ii. 7-11). To have stated this with the utmost clearness and emphasis is a distinctive service to Christian thought, and one to which the author was provoked by propaganda which seemed to deny it. When something hitherto taken for granted is challenged, it must be made perfectly explicit. Hence the reiteration in this epistle of what might

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almost seem a Christian truism. Nowhere else in the New Testament is it made more clear that the evangelical proclamation of the love of God in sending the Saviour (iv. 9, 14), and the commandment 'Love one another' (iv. 11, 21), are aspects of a single and indivisible divine revelation by which the Christian religion is constituted; and nowhere is there less excuse for the reader to suppose that Christian theology can stand apart from Christian ethics, or Christian ethics apart from theology.

Upon the relation of this epistle to the tradition of the teaching of Jesus more must be said presently. We now take up again the main thread of the *kerygma*.

In all our accounts of the apostolic preaching the death of Christ has a prominent place. I passed on to you, writes Paul, what I had myself received, namely, that Christ died for our sins, as the scriptures had said, and he appeals confidently to the consensus of apostolic testimony. (1 Cor. xv. 3, 11). The Old Testament 'scriptures' to which this highly compressed statement refers can, at least in part, be identified by comparison with other passages in the New Testament. It seems that the most important of them is the prophecy of the Suffering Servant of the Lord in Isa. lii. 13 - liii. 12. The opening words of this prophecy are cited (freely) in the Petrine speech, Acts iii. 13; and in Acts viii. 26-38 it is made the text of the preaching of the Gospel to an Ethiopian (which we may take as typical of the earliest 'foreign missions'). The implication is that from an extremely early period, if not from the very first, the preaching of the apostles interpreted the death of Christ through the prophetic conception of the Servant of the Lord, whose vicarious sufferings bring salvation to 'many.' The reference to the Isaianic prophecy is incorporated in the Synoptic Gospels (Mark x. 45, ix. 12, Luke xxii. 37, etc.), and there is no good reason to reject their evidence that it was already made in the sayings of Jesus Himself. Our author therefore is keeping closely to the primitive *kerygma* when he says, **The blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from every sin** (i. 7); or, in language which is the 'Johannine' equivalent for Mark xv. 45, **He laid down His life for us** (iii. 16; cf. also

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Gal. ii. 20). There is so far no attempt to go further theologically than the simple statements of the early *kerygma*; and even in ii. 2, iv. 10, where Christ is said to be the 'expiation' for our sins (cf. Rom. iii. 25), there is nothing that goes beyond the implications of the Isaianic prophecy.

In the Preaching of the Apostles, the announcement of the death of Christ is regularly followed by the announcement of His resurrection. Indeed the double proclamation that Christ died and rose again is the core of the *kerygma* in all its forms. It is surprising to find that in this epistle there is no direct allusion to the resurrection. One other New Testament writing resembles it in this respect. In the Epistle to the Hebrews the only direct reference is in the liturgical language of the closing Benediction and Doxology (xiii. 20-1). In practically every other book of the New Testament the resurrection has a dominant place.

It seems possible, however, to distinguish two slightly different ways of regarding it. Some, it would seem, thought chiefly of the appearances of the risen Christ to His followers, and especially of their evidential value for faith. Others (or the same persons in a different context) thought chiefly of the risen Christ as exalted 'at the right hand of God,' ready to come again in glory. The difference is reflected in various forms of the *kerygma*: compare, for instance, Acts ii. 32-6, iii. 13-21, where the emphasis is entirely on the latter aspect, with Acts x. 40-1, xiii. 30-1, where the emphasis is on the former aspect. (See also R. H. Lightfoot, *Locality and Doctrine in the Gospels*, where a somewhat similar distinction is drawn between the outlook of the Gospels according to Mark and Luke). If the foreground of one's mind were occupied with the thought of Christ's eternal power and glory in the heavenly places, the fact of His resurrection might be taken to be implied in this larger and more inclusive truth. To put it in terms of the *kerygma*, the affirmation of Christ's resurrection might be taken as implicit in the clause affirming His victory over 'principalities and powers,' and His eternal session 'at the right hand of God.' Perhaps this is true of our author.

For the clause just referred to, that which affirms Christ's

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exaltation, the earliest forms of the *kerygma* appear to look back to Psalm cx. 1 (Acts ii. 34-5, Rom. viii. 34, 1 Pet. iii. 22, etc.) to which (according to an entirely credible statement in Mark xii. 35-7) Jesus Himself had drawn attention. This passage was understood to indicate (i) that the risen Christ is 'Lord of all' (Acts x. 36; cf. Phil. ii. 9-11), and (ii) that He is victorious over all cosmic powers (cf. 1 Pet. iii. 22). This double theme is elaborated in a great variety of ways in the New Testament writings. In the Fourth Gospel His victory is won over the Prince of this world (xii. 31; cf. xiv. 30, xvi. 11), and consequently over the world itself (xvi. 33). It is this line of thought that is followed by our author. The world, that is, human society organized in hostility to God (or in plain terms, pagan society as he knew it), lies in the power of the evil One (v. 19), or the devil. It was to destroy the deeds of the devil that the Son of God appeared (iii. 8). He is greater than he who is in the world (iv. 4)—more powerful, that is, than the Prince of this world—and consequently He is the conqueror of 'the world' as a power hostile to man's salvation. And from this follows the further consequence, which the writer draws for his readers' encouragement, that to have faith in Christ is to share His victory; our faith, that is the conquest which conquers the world; for he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God is the world's conqueror (v. 4-5). We shall certainly be within the author's intention if we understand that for the confirmation of his readers' faith he is appealing once more to the most certain testimony of that which you learned from the very beginning; in other words, the Gospel itself as declared in the Preaching of the Apostles and handed down in the Church. The Gospel, rightly understood, is a proclamation of Christ's victory; and to accept the Gospel heartily, in its fulness, is to share that victory. He would have allowed no other ground for confidence or optimism in the great war against the powers of evil and of the lie.

The testimony of the apostolic preaching to Christ ends with a clause affirming the certain expectation of His second coming which brings the 'end of the age' (Matt. xxviii. 20), the 'restoration of all things' (Acts iii. 21), and the last judgment

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(Acts x. 42, Rom. ii. 16, etc.). It would appear that in the earliest days the second advent was proclaimed as the immediately impending completion of a process set in motion by the entry of Christ into the world, and carried forward in His ministry, death, resurrection and ascension. As time went on, and the Lord did not return in the way He was expected, the continuity of the process was broken. The new situation was met by various Christian thinkers in different ways. In the Fourth Gospel, although the belief in a judgment on the 'last day' is retained, its significance is attenuated; for the whole episode of Christ's incarnation, including His passion and death, is shown to be the world's Day of Judgment; and the promise of His return is held to have been fulfilled by His resurrection and the coming of the Paraclete (John iii. 17-21, ix. 39-41, xii. 31-32, xiv. 15-23). The author of the First Epistle knows nothing of this reinterpretation of the Advent hope. He holds to the belief that the great Day of Judgment is at hand; and although he must have seen the repeated disappointment of that belief, he thinks he now has definite grounds for confidence that the delay will not be prolonged (ii. 18). Once again the expectation proved illusory. But this belief, persisting all through the first century of Christianity, that the consummation of all things lay 'round the corner,' had its value. It served to keep alive, through a period of intense trial, a sense of the inconceivable nearness and reality of the unseen world, and of the Lord 'whom having not seen ye love'; and it evoked a sense of moral urgency corresponding to the incalculable significance of the present moment, which (for all one knew) might in strict truth be the last moment before the great Day dawned.

It is instructive to observe the ideas which in this epistle are associated with the thought of the Lord's advent. First, the thought of coming judgment, here as elsewhere in the New Testament, sharpens the sense of moral responsibility. But this sense of responsibility is not to be associated with any craven fear; for our Judge is Christ, and Christ is the expression of the divine love, and if we dwell in love there is nothing to frighten us in the thought of meeting Christ (iv. 14-18, ii. 28). For,

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secondly, the main thing is, after all, that Jesus Christ Himself is to appear: **we are to see Him as He is** (iii. 2). The writer has here put in the simplest possible words, not indeed the whole content of Christian eschatology, but the controlling conviction which gives character to any eschatology which is to be distinctively Christian. From it he proceeds to draw consequences directly relevant to the ethical life of a Christian man: we cannot see Christ as He is without being like Him; and this prospect must powerfully stimulate moral endeavour (iii. 2-3).

It is clear that while our author shares the popular belief of early Christianity in an almost immediate end of the world, he avoids the crude and even fanatical forms which that belief could take (as it does, for example, in parts of the Book of Revelation), and emphasizes aspects of it which are of permanent relevance to Christian faith and life.

In addition to the affirmations about Christ and His work, the *kerygma* seems to have included, in one form or another, a testimony to the Church as the People of God under the new covenant, distinguished as such notably by the gift of the Spirit (as foretold in prophecy), and enjoying forgiveness of sins and the assurance of salvation. In the examples of apostolic preaching given in the Acts, the proclamation of the Gospel normally issues in an appeal to the hearers for faith and repentance, accompanied by the offer of initiation (by baptism) into the life of the true 'Israel of God' with all its distinctive privileges (Acts ii. 38-9, iv. 11-12, xiii. 38).

In our epistle the word 'church' does not occur (as it is also absent from the Fourth Gospel); but the author is acutely conscious of the Church as a community called into being by the act of God in Christ and sustained by fellowship with the **Father and with His Son Jesus Christ** (i. 3). Like the earliest preachers, he appeals to the witness of the Spirit (v. 6; cf. Acts ii. 33, v. 32, etc.). He does not allude to more developed doctrines such as the Pauline conception of the 'Spirit of Christ' as the animating and unifying principle of the Body of Christ and the ground of moral achievement, or the Johannine conception of the Paraclete as Christ's representative dwelling in

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His Church and mediating His judgment upon the world (John xvi. 7-11). He stands upon the ground of the simpler early Preaching: that the manifest presence and activity of the Spirit is the evidence of the truth of the Gospel and the reality of Christian experience.

Fully in line, again, with the earliest tradition is the contrast drawn in ii. 7-17 between the Church and the world. 'The world' is here human society organized in hostility to the will of God; but it is also the embodiment of an order of life belonging to the evil age which has in principle been brought to an end by the coming of Christ, and is now manifestly in process of dissolution. Over against this dying order is a new order of life, also embodied (it is implied) in a society, the Church, which possesses the marks of the people of the new covenant (cf. Jer. xxxi. 31-4; Heb. viii. 8-12)—forgiveness of sins and knowledge of God; and is, by virtue of Christ's conquest of 'principalities and powers', victorious over the world.

In contrast to the dying world, the divine community, being united with the will of God, remains for ever (ii. 17). For our author the supreme divine gift is life eternal (v. 11), and it is this which is proclaimed in the Gospel, which accordingly is called 'the word of life' (i. 1). It is likely that in 'Johannine' circles the idea of 'eternal life' was in some measure affected by Hellenistic philosophy; but the idea itself is rooted in the earliest Preaching. In the Acts, although the complete expression occurs only in a passage with a Pauline colouring (Acts xiii. 46-8), yet elsewhere the effect of the Preaching upon the Gentiles is described as 'repentance unto life' (xi. 18); the Gospel itself is called 'the words of this life' (v. 20); and Christ Himself, 'the Prince of life' (iii. 15). In the Synoptic Gospels the expression 'life' or 'eternal life,' is used as an alternative for 'the Kingdom of God' in certain connections. To 'enter into the Kingdom of God,' to 'enter into life,' to 'inherit eternal life,' and to 'be saved' are synonyms (Mark ix. 43-7, x. 17, 23-6). In the eschatological setting of the earliest preaching 'eternal life' is 'the life of the Age to Come,' now inaugurated by the coming of Christ. That is what it essentially is (and not any philosophical conception of immortality) in this epistle.

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Of its character and quality the author has important things to say, to which we shall turn presently.

So much for the *kerygma*, or proclamation of the Gospel. We now turn to the other side of the tradition, that which preserved the Sayings of Jesus, chiefly for the purpose of instruction in Christian morals, individual and social. We have already seen that our author insists with particular emphasis upon the inseparable unity of the Gospel and the Commandment of Christ. He often echoes the teaching of the Lord as reported in the Fourth Gospel. It will, however, be of some interest to enquire whether he shows acquaintance with a tradition of the Sayings over and above the tradition embodied in the Fourth Gospel; and here our standard of comparison must be the Synoptic Gospels. There is no verbal similarity close enough to suggest that the author was acquainted with any of these Gospels in their existing forms. Nevertheless there are some striking resemblances which strongly suggest that he was acquainted with an oral tradition of the Sayings similar to that which underlies the Synoptic record.

We have already observed that for him the Law of Christ is summed up in what he calls (as does the Fourth Gospel) the New Commandment: 'Love one another.' That form of the precept is Johannine. But in iv. 21 he seems to betray knowledge of a formulation similar to that which we have in Mark xii. 28-31 and parallels.¹

Mark xii. 29-31

The first commandment is:
... Thou shalt love the Lord
thy God. ... And the second
is this: Thou shalt love thy
neighbour as thyself.

1 John iv. 21

This commandment we
have from Him: that he who
loves God shall love his
brother also.

This combination of the commandments of love to God and love to man is not made in the Fourth Gospel.

In 1 John iv. 11 the precept is put in another way: 'If God so loved us we ought also to love one another.' The principle is similar (though the language is different) to that which is

¹ In the following citations, a literal translation is offered, the degree of identity in language being sometimes disguised in the Moffatt rendering.

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expressed in Matt. xviii. 33, 'Ought you not to have had mercy on your fellow-servants as I had mercy on you?' Again, in iv. 7 we have (in distinctively 'Johannine' language) the doctrine that 'he who loves is born of God'; but the same idea is present in Matt. v. 44-5: 'Love your enemies . . . that you may become sons of your Father in heaven.' On the converse side, our author says that hatred is murder, and the murderer is excluded from eternal life (iii. 15). There is sufficient authority for this in Matt. v. 21-2 (though once again there is no verbal parallel). 'It was said to the ancients: Thou shalt not kill; whoever kills is liable to the Judgment. But I say to you: Whoever is angry with his brother is liable to the Judgment.'

In these fundamental matters of Christian ethics we might perhaps have assumed, even without direct evidence, that any type of Christian tradition would preserve the essentials of the teaching of Jesus in one form or another. But there are many other passages where, though there is no extensive identity of language with the Synoptic Gospels, there are nevertheless significant echoes.

In ii. 22, 23, 28, iv. 2, 3, we have pronouncements upon the general theme of 'confessing' and 'disowning' Christ, which seem to be the result of reflection upon such sayings as those which are preserved in Mark viii. 37-8, Matt. x. 32-3, Luke ix. 26, xii. 8-9 (the keywords 'confess,' 'disown,' 'shame' are common to the Gospels and the Epistle). It appears that these sayings were present in more than one of the sources of the Synoptic Gospels, and there is no reason why our author should not have been acquainted with yet another version of them, in the oral tradition which he received (see also notes, pp. 56-7, 64).

Compare again the following passages:

Matt. vii. 21

Not everyone who says to me 'Lord, Lord!' will enter the Kingdom of Heaven, but he who does the will of my Father in heaven.

1 John ii. 17

He who does the will of God remains for ever.

We recall that to 'enter the Kingdom of heaven' and to 'inherit eternal life' are synonyms in the Synoptic Gospels.

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Matt. v. 8-9

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.

I John iii. 1-3

See what love the Father has given us, to be called children of God . . . we shall see Him as He is. . . . He who has this hope cleanses himself.

It certainly looks as if our author were acquainted with the Beatitudes in one form or another. He has put together the blessings of seeing God and being called God's children, which in Matthew are kept distinct, and associated them both with the idea of purity.

Matt. xxiv. 11

Many pseudo-prophets will arise and lead many astray.

I John iv. 1

Test the spirits . . . because many pseudo-prophets have gone out into the world.

Matt. vii. 15, 20

Beware of pseudo-prophets. . . . From their fruits you shall recognize them.

Matt. xxiv. 24

Pseudo-christs and pseudo-prophets will arise . . . so as to lead even the elect astray, if possible.

I John ii. 18

As you have heard that Antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come.

'Antichrist' is not identical with 'pseudo-christ,' but it may be that the author of the epistle had in mind some such saying as this, and combined it with other current predictions.

Mark xiii. 5

Beware that no one leads you astray.

I John iii. 7

Children, let no one lead you astray.

Matt. v. 48

You shall be perfect, as your Father in heaven is perfect.

I John iii. 7

He who performs righteousness is righteous as He is righteous.

Luke vi. 36

Be merciful, as your Father is merciful.

(Here, as so often, it is not very clear whether 'He' is the Father or the Son; but for this author the difference is negligible.)

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'Perfect,' 'merciful,' 'righteous': these might well represent variants of one saying.

Luke vi. 22

Blessed are you when men hate you.

1 John iii. 13

Do not be surprised if the world hates you.

Matt. vii. 8 = Luke xi. 10

Everyone who asks receives.

1 John iii. 22

Whatever we ask for we receive from Him.

Mark xi. 24

Whatever you pray and ask for, believe you have received it, and you shall have it.

1 John v. 15

If we know that He hears us whatever we ask for, we know that we possess those things we have asked of Him.

Matt. x. 25 (cf. Luke vi. 40)

It is enough for the disciple to be as his teacher, and the slave as his master.

1 John iv. 17

As He is, so are we in this world.

Matt. xi. 30

My yoke is kindly and my burden light.

1 John v. 3

His commandments are not heavy.

If it be allowed that these examples cumulatively build up a probability that our author is referring to a body of traditional Sayings of Jesus similar to that which we have in the Synoptic Gospels, then we may perhaps trace reminiscences of such a tradition in other places where the resemblance is not so obvious.

In the notes on i. 5-6 it is suggested that the teaching about 'walking in the light,' there and in ii. 9-11, though it has immediate antecedents in the Fourth Gospel, nevertheless fairly represents the purport of such passages as Matt. vi. 22-3, Luke xi. 34-6, where the keywords are 'light' and 'darkness.' The figurative use of the term 'blindness' in ii. 11 is consonant with the language of the Synoptic Sayings (cf. Luke vi. 39), and the term translated pitfall—*skandalon* in the original—is one that has a significant place in the vocabulary of the Synoptics (Matt. xiii. 41, xvi. 23, xviii. 7). It is not found in the Fourth

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Gospel, and it is not a word that a Hellenistic writer would ordinarily be likely to use (see Moffatt Commentary, *Romans*, xiv. 13).

Again, while the language used about 'the world' in ii. 15-17 has a distinctively 'Johannine' ring, the contemptuous dismissal of the desires of a transient world is implicit in Luke xii. 29-30: 'You are not to seek after things to eat and drink, for all that is what the nations of the world seek after,' and Mark viii. 36: 'What advantage is it to a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul?'

Finally, when our author declares the content of the 'word of life' to be 'what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes,' can we exclude an allusion to the great 'beatitude' of Matt. xiii. 16-17 (Luke x. 23-4)?

'Blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears, because they hear. In truth I tell you, many prophets and saints desired to see what you see, and did not see it; to hear what you hear, and did not hear it.'

To sum up: while the First Epistle of John is written in a peculiar idiom both of thought and of speech, showing the undeniable influence of the Hellenistic environment, its author is justified in claiming that the substance of his message to his readers is neither more nor less than the original and unchanging content of the Church's common faith, embodied in the Gospel and the Commandment, and attested by primary witnesses. It is this that gives his work its universal, catholic, significance. He might have spent his time in discussing and refuting the errors of the heretical propaganda. If he had done so, the epistle would now have had little more than antiquarian interest. But the 'word of life,' that is the Gospel and the Commandment of Christ as delivered by the apostles, commands the prime interest of Christians everywhere and at all times. Fidelity to it, under all changes of theological climate, remains the test *stantis vel cadentis ecclesiae*.

It is clear that the theological climate prevailing at the time and place of writing differs appreciably from that of most of

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the New Testament. The author is free to reinterpret and apply fundamental articles of faith in relation to a new situation: a task to which Christian teachers are called at every period. He writes as a pastor to his people, rather with the practical aim of recalling them to fundamental loyalties than with the intention of developing theological doctrines. His interest in the building up of Christian dogma is limited. It is not here, but in the Fourth Gospel, that we must look for the distinctively 'Johannine' contribution to the clarification of Christology and of the doctrine of the Atonement, and for that profound insight into the Christian experience of God as Father, Son and Paraclete which both enforced and made possible the formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity. Our author is little concerned about precise theological definition. He often writes in terms which leave it uncertain whether the reference is to God the Father or to Christ. It seems as if he were almost indifferent to that distinction of Persons which is drawn with such clearness and subtlety in the discourses of the Fourth Gospel; and his allusions to the Holy Spirit follow the usage of popular Christianity without apparent interest in any deeper theological implications.

The especial emphasis, however, which he places upon certain aspects of the Church's tradition issues in a distinctive and consistent presentation of the Christian life and faith which is of high importance to theology in the wider sense.

First we may place his emphasis upon the realization of eternal life here and now. As we have seen, our author shares the eschatological expectations of early Christianity. When he speaks of eternal life, he includes in it the idea of continuance after death (or, rather, after the dissolution of this world, ii. 17), and he holds out the prospect of a future glory at present inconceivable. Yet he makes it perfectly clear that eternal life is a present possession and experience of believers (v. 12-13). The Christian is *now* a child of God: the divine 'seed' (the germ of divinity, may we say?) resides in him; he knows God, dwells in God and is indwelt by God; he has fellowship with the Father and the Son; he is in the light; he possesses an 'unction' or initiation which confers supernatural knowledge;

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he has within him the divine Spirit witnessing to the truth of that which he believes, and to the reality of his experience of God. These modes of expression (with two exceptions) echo more or less clearly the language of contemporary Hellenistic mysticism. There they refer to the initiate who by knowledge of God has become immortal like the gods. Here they are used to describe the believer as the possessor of eternal life; and they bring into full light the truth (implied all through the New Testament) that the eternal life which is offered through the Gospel is by no means simply a prolongation of existence beyond the grave, but life of a particular quality, lived in union with God, and accessible to present experience, while it waits for its perfection upon a change yet to come.

Secondly, he insists that all such language is misleading or meaningless unless it is capable of being translated into ethical terms. To be in the light is to be cleansed from evil; to know God is to obey His commands; to be a child of God is to be pure and righteous like Him (or at least to be getting purified, iii. 3). And at this point we begin to see the relevance of our author's repeated insistence upon the actuality of Christ's life 'in the flesh.' It proceeds from no theoretical interest in dogma. As we have seen, our author is not distinguished by any such interest. He does not insist upon the Incarnation because this doctrine is necessary to a complete theological scheme; but because the incarnate life of Christ fills the concept of eternal life with human, personal, ethical meaning. What is it to dwell in God? It is to live after the example of Christ (ii. 6). What is it to walk in the light? It is to obey the commands of Christ (ii. 7-11). In other words, all this 'mystical' language about eternal life is false and pernicious if it is used in a merely 'mystical' sense; even in a merely religious sense; it is true only if religion and ethics interpenetrate; and the religious ethics, or ethical religion, of Christians is defined by reference to the remembered and recorded life and teaching of Jesus Christ, who suffered under Pontius Pilate.

Thirdly, when once it is recognized that real religion is ethical religion, and that it falls to be judged by the standards

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of the life and teaching of Jesus Christ, it is seen to demand as its essential mark one overriding ethical principle, of which Christ is the supreme exponent; that which our author, like all New Testament writers, calls by the untranslatable Greek term, *agapé*. We are bound to render it, in general, by the English word 'love,' though our older religious speech took a word from the Latin and called it 'charity.' In common English usage, neither word is a complete equivalent to the Greek. In this commentary 'charity' is frequently used as an alternative rendering, to remind the reader that if he reads 'love' he must understand it in a distinctive sense. Whichever word we use, however, it requires to be filled with meaning from the source which originally supplied the colourless Greek term with its Christian connotation—the source to which our author continually refers us: the life and teaching of Jesus Christ. If we have the Gospel record in mind, we need not be at a loss about the meaning of 'love,' or 'charity,' as the word is used in this epistle. And if we understand this, then, as our author constantly affirms, we know what eternal life really means.

It is clear that the life of eternity, so conceived, can be lived only in community. *Agapé* is of such a nature that we simply cannot love God to the exclusion of our fellow men. Whatever religious emotion may be aroused in the soul by the contemplation of the divine Being, it is not worthy to be called *agapé* unless it issues in a concern for some fellow human being, which will lead us to serve him at our cost (iii. 16-17). That is to state the principle in its lowest and simplest terms. But such mutual service by self-sacrifice is a property of community life: indeed, it alone is capable of creating a real community out of an aggregation of people. Thus the kind of religion recommended in this epistle has little in common with the mysticism which is described as a 'flight of the alone to the Alone.' The fatherhood of God implies a family of God in which His children live as brothers. This is the basis of the 'fellowship' which is the essential mark of the Church (i. 3).

The author is so acutely aware of the intimacy of the family tie within the Church that he sometimes speaks as if the

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Christian fellowship alone offered the proper field for the exercise of charity. He speaks of love either for 'one another' or for our 'brothers,' and the context shows that he is thinking of fellow Christians (see iii. 14, v. 1-2), of whom alone it can be said, strictly, that they are 'children of God' (iii. 2) and consequently 'brothers' of all others who have been similarly regenerate by His Word (iii. 9 and note). (The doctrine that all men, as such, are by nature the offspring of God has little biblical support. It is found explicitly in the New Testament only in a quotation from a pagan poet (Acts xvii. 28); and it is implied in Luke iii. 38, and possibly, though not probably, in Jas. i. 18, but nowhere else. See Moffatt Commentary, *Romans*, pp. 130-1.)

In justice to the author, it must be remembered that he is dealing with a particular situation which has arisen within the Church. It is not the attitude of Christians towards mankind at large that is in question, but their attitude towards one another in the Church. The author therefore is primarily concerned with charity in its particular aspect (to employ Paul's precise terminology) of love for the brotherhood (*phila-delphia*, Rom. xii. 10; see note in Moffatt Commentary). He certainly does not intend to deny that *agapē* has also a wider application; and in many places his expressions are quite unrestricted (e.g. iv. 16, 19). It is further to be observed that the Church in the New Testament is represented as the nucleus (or 'firstfruits'; cf. Rom. xi. 16, Jas. i. 18, Rev. xiv. 4) of a redeemed humanity; as the trustee (so to speak) of God's benefits towards all mankind; and that in fact a great deal of what is said about the Church is fully true only if its ultimate limits are set nowhere short of the frontiers of the human race (or even of the whole creation; see Rom. viii. 20-3, Eph. i. 3-14). Our author is aware of this, in spite of his severe insistence upon the opposition between the Church and the world (see ii. 2, iv. 14). As he says that Christ is the expiation for our sins, and hastens to add, 'not ours only, but those of the whole world'; so we may read his maxim, 'We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love our (Christian) brothers,' with the addition—'and not them only, but all our

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fellow men.' The Church, like the family, should be a school of charity whose lessons may be applied abroad.

If we put these three points together, we arrive at a picture of what is most distinctive in this epistle. There are always cropping up two misconceptions of what religion is. For some minds, it is a matter of exalted 'spiritual' states; for others, it is 'morality tinged with emotion.' To minds of the former cast this epistle may at times smack of 'moralism' or even 'legalism'; to minds of the latter cast, its exalted language about religious experience as a foretaste of eternal life may seem almost highfalutin. The writer, however, insists that while glib talk about religious experience is a snare and a delusion in the absence of a serious attention to daily conduct, a truly virtuous life can spring only out of a unique relation to God, which is not achieved by us, but granted by His grace. He is able to maintain this position persuasively because he construes both religious experience and morality in terms of *agapé*, which is at once the only valid basis of communion with God, and the only spring of true virtue.

Finally, this reading of the Christian life as one of union with God, upon ethical conditions, these conditions determined by the overriding principle of love, or charity, culminates in our author's outstanding contribution to Christian theology: the doctrine that 'God is love.' For a discussion of its meaning and implications, the reader must be referred to the notes on iv. 8. Starting without any aim at dogmatic definition, the author of the epistle has found himself led, through reflection upon the content of the tradition and of Christian experience, to formulate the most profound, as well as the simplest, summing up of the Christian revelation of God: a maxim which, once enunciated, becomes the touchstone of Christian faith and life, and a signpost to the direction which must be taken by all sound theological thinking.

IV. RELATION OF THE FIRST EPISTLE TO THE FOURTH GOSPEL

That very judicious critic, Bishop Dionysius of Alexandria, about the middle of the third century, wrote as follows about the Fourth Gospel and the First Epistle of John:

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'The Gospel and the Epistle agree with one another. They begin alike . . . [John i. 1. 14; 1 John i. 1-3] . . . and he deals with his whole matter by way of the same topics and terms, some of which I will briefly enumerate. Anyone who reads attentively will find in each writing, life largely, light largely, and the repudiation of darkness; truth continually, grace, joy, the flesh and blood of the Lord, judgment, the forgiveness of sins, God's love for us, and the mutual love enjoined upon us; that we must keep all the commandments; the condemnation of the world, the devil, and Antichrist; the promise of the Holy Spirit; God's adoption of us as sons; the absolute faith demanded of us; the Father and the Son everywhere. To characterize them generally all through, one may observe one and the same complexion in the Gospel and the Epistle' (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, VII. 25. 18-21).

The good bishop is quite right; most of the themes treated in the Epistle have a place also in the Gospel, and there is a general affinity of theological outlook, at least in comparison with any other part of the New Testament.

Not only the ideas of the two writings, but also their ways of expressing them, are similar. It would be easy to compile a list of fifty or more phrases in the Epistle which have close parallels in the Gospel. The reader, however, can best form an impression of the extent of the similarity, if he goes through the text of the Epistle (perhaps with the help of a concordance or a good reference Bible), and underlines all those expressions which echo the language of the Gospel more or less exactly. A glance at the result will show how few and short are those passages of the Epistle which are free from such echoes.

We seem bound to conclude, either that the two writings are from one hand, or that the writer of the one was strongly influenced by the writer of the other, whether that influence was due to personal discipleship, or to a deep and prolonged study of his work, or to both.

The unvarying tradition from early times, which is upheld by many modern scholars, is that the First Epistle and the

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Gospel are the work of one author. There are, however, some difficulties about this view. When we have fully recognized the close kinship of the two writings, we must also observe that there are differences between them, both in form and in content, which are by no means negligible.

First, there are differences of style, in spite of the general similarity which we have noted. These differences could be fully set out only in a detailed study of the Greek text;¹ but in a measure they can be appreciated in an English translation.

There is surely to be felt in the Fourth Gospel a richness, a subtlety, a penetrating quality of style to which the Epistle cannot pretend. While the rhythm of both is slow and regular, in the Gospel it is subtly varied, within the limits imposed by its general character; but in the Epistle regularity often descends to monotony. The language of the Gospel has an intensity, a kind of inward glow, a controlled excitement, which the reader does not feel, or seldom feels, in the Epistle. The language of the Epistle is generally correct Greek, though not always as lucid as might be wished; it is sometimes forcible and epigrammatic; but it does not suggest the pen of a ready writer. It does not persuade the reader (as does the Fourth Gospel) that here is a man who, with a relatively small vocabulary and a narrow range of grammatical idiom, has genuine power of style.

Such impressions of style are apt to be subjective; but in certain respects they are open to be tested by detailed study of the linguistic phenomena in the Greek. Thus, the impression of a certain monotony is confirmed by the observation that the writer of the Epistle greatly overworks a few favourite grammatical constructions; and that he uses a much smaller variety of compound verbs (little more than one-tenth of the number

¹ For such a detailed study the reader may be referred to my paper, *The First Epistle of John and the Fourth Gospel* (Manchester University Press), reprinted from the *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, Vol. 21, No. 1, April, 1937. Subsequent revision has shown that the word-lists and statistics given there need minor corrections. These do not, however, affect the general conclusion; on a balance, they slightly strengthen the evidence for a significant difference of style between the two writings.

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used in the Gospel), and of those 'grammatical words' (particles, conjunctions, and the like) which, especially in Greek, give variety and individual colour to a writer's style.

On the other hand, he has forms of speech which are lacking in the Gospel. Like many popular writers on philosophical subjects in the Hellenistic period, he is fond of the figure known as the rhetorical question (see ii. 22, iii. 12. 17, v. 5), which probably does not occur in the Gospel (for Pilate's 'What is truth?' is at any rate not that kind of rhetorical question). Again, the conditional sentence (to which he is immoderately addicted, having an average of just under five per page, against just over one per page in the Gospel) is used in a variety of rhetorical figures unparalleled in the Gospel (see i. 6, 8, 9, ii. 1, 29, v. 9, 15, and perhaps iii. 20).

Among the idioms present in the Gospel, but absent from the Epistle, the most interesting and significant are a group which have been held to betray Semitic influence. In some of these the Semitic character is not sure, but there are at least five notable idioms, characteristic of the Gospel, where the case for Aramaism is very strong. Of these, four are entirely unknown to the Epistle, and the fifth occurs doubtfully in one passage where the manuscript evidence leaves the true text uncertain. Indeed, a careful scrutiny of the language of the Epistle fails to disclose any evidence of definable Semitism, apart from two quite doubtful examples. The language of the Gospel, on the other hand, undoubtedly shows a definite Semitic colouring, whether this is due to translation from an Aramaic original (which is unlikely), or to the use of Aramaic sources, or (which seems most probable) to bilingualism in the writer.

The vocabulary of the Gospel is larger than that of the Epistle, as we might expect, in view of its much greater length and the greater variety of its themes. Yet the Epistle, short as it is, has nearly forty words and expressions which do not occur in the Gospel. There is so far nothing very remarkable. It is a different matter when we observe that out of the numerous words present in the Gospel but absent from the Epistle, a list of over thirty can be compiled which are either so frequent in the Gospel, or so closely related to its central

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ideas, that their absence from a writing claiming Johannine authorship is significant. It is surely strange that the author of the Gospel should have written a second work upon some of the central Christian themes—themes which have a prominent place in his major work—without using (for example) the words which came so readily to him for the ideas of being saved and lost, for grace and peace, for the divine necessity ('it must needs be'), for 'bearing fruit' in Christian living, without referring to Christ as 'Lord,' to His glory, His descent from heaven and ascent to heaven again, or His resurrection. No one can say it is impossible; but it makes one wonder.

The weight to be given to considerations of style and language will be estimated differently by different minds. We turn now from form to content, and enquire how far the ideas of the Epistle, and its religious or theological outlook, are identical with those of the Gospel, or differ from them significantly.

That the two writings, as compared with the rest of the New Testament, show a decided affinity of thought and standpoint is, as we have observed, obvious to any attentive reader. That there are certain differences is equally obvious, and not surprising. A writer who exactly repeats himself in two separate works betrays an infertile mind. Moreover, it is natural enough that some of the themes treated in the Gospel should be lacking in the Epistle, a short work with a restricted aim.

There are, however, some divergences which seem to go beyond what we should naturally expect in two works from the same hand.

In the first place, the Epistle is unique among New Testament writings (if we except its two short companions) in having no quotation from the Old Testament, only one explicit reference to the Old Testament (iii. 12), and few if any direct echoes of Old Testament language. The Fourth Gospel, like the other Gospels, has numerous quotations, and still more numerous implicit (but quite definite) allusions, and its language frequently recalls that of the Greek Old Testament. This difference might be accounted for by the difference in aim between the two writings, or by the Evangelist's use of sources

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which contained Old Testament material. (It may be noted that some parts of the Gospel, for instance the Farewell Discourses, have fewer Old Testament quotations or allusions than some other parts, though in no part are they absent.) But there is a further point. Not only has the Fourth Gospel an extensive Old Testament background; it also betrays close acquaintance with contemporary Jewish ideas and practices, and a strong interest in the doctrines, not only of Hellenistic Judaism, but of the Rabbinic Judaism of Palestine. A great Jewish scholar, the late Israel Abrahams, once said that the Fourth Gospel struck him as the most Jewish of the four. Whether or not that is an overstatement, no one would be tempted to any such statement with reference to the First Epistle. We have already noted that its language shows no clear trace of Semitism; and while all the literature of early Christianity carries over something from its Jewish antecedents, there is no other New Testament writing in which the Jewish colouring is so little significant as in the Johannine Epistles. Here then is a formidable difference between our two writings: the Gospel according to John has a stamp derived from the influence of the Old Testament, from interest in Judaism as a living religion, and from knowledge of a Semitic tongue: the Epistle is free from any such stamp.

In contrast, the Hellenistic element, which in the Fourth Gospel is fused with the Hebraic after a unique fashion, has in some respects freer play in the First Epistle.

The maxim, for instance, 'God is light' (i. 4), belongs properly to a circle of ideas neither Christian nor Jewish in origin, though it is here filled with definitely Christian meaning. The Fourth Evangelist, like Philo the Jew, stops short of enunciating it without qualification. The writer of the Epistle is less guarded (see notes, pp. 18-19).

It is argued in the notes that the ideas of the divine 'seed' (iii. 9), and of the 'unction' or 'chrism' which confers supernatural knowledge (ii. 20, 27), are best understood as derived (with a profound change of meaning) from 'Gnostic' sources. Neither of these ideas occurs in the Fourth Gospel.

Again, the argument implied in the statement, 'We know

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that if He is manifested we shall be like Him, because we shall see Him as He is' (iii. 2), is shown in the notes (p. 71) to rest upon presuppositions characteristic of 'Hellenistic mysticism.' The Fourth Gospel promises the vision of Christ in His glory (xvii. 24), but does not draw the inference that we shall bear His likeness.

Most significant of all, the weightiest theological pronouncement in the Epistle—the maxim, 'God is love'—while its inspiration is wholly Christian, appears to have been moulded upon lines traceable directly to ideas of Hellenistic thinkers about the divine nature (see notes, pp. 107–10). The maxim is so familiar to us, and the idea so deeply rooted in Christian thought, that the reader of the Epistle is hardly aware how strange it is to find such a statement in the New Testament. In form, it equates the Deity with a purely abstract idea—purely abstract in a sense not applicable to such Old Testament maxims as 'The Lord is my salvation.' The sense intended is far from abstract; but the fact remains that the author of the Epistle has followed a mode of thought and expression avoided in all other New Testament writings, including the Fourth Gospel. (It should perhaps be added that the term 'Spirit' in the Johannine definition, 'God is Spirit,' is for any ancient thinker, Hebraic or Hellenistic, anything but abstract, whatever it may be for moderns.)

Here then we have evidence which enables us to carry a step farther our definition of the difference between the outlook of the Epistle and that of the Fourth Gospel: the Epistle is not only less Hebraic and Jewish; it is also more free in its adoption of Hellenistic modes of thought and expression.

Thirdly, there are various points, and those by no means unimportant, where the Epistle represents a theological outlook nearer than that of the Gospel to primitive, or popular, Christianity. These have already been referred to (pp. xxvii–xlii) and receive full treatment in the notes. They need only be summarized here.

(i) The Epistle holds out the prospect of a near Advent of Christ and end of the world, quite in the primitive way, taking no account of the profound reinterpretation of eschatology

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which is one of the distinguishing marks of the thought of the Fourth Gospel—a reinterpretation, it should be added, which appears to do fuller justice to the teaching of Jesus Christ than the naïve thinking of the primitive Church.

(ii) The statements made in the Epistle about the redemptive efficacy of the death of Christ scarcely go beyond the terms of the primitive apostolic Preaching. Only one technical term of theology is used, the word which should be translated 'expiation' (ii. 2, iv. 10; see notes, pp. 25-7). This term, which is little more than an index to the doctrine of the Suffering Servant of the Lord in the prophecy of the Second Isaiah, is avoided in the Fourth Gospel. Though the Evangelist, like most other New Testament writers, alludes to the classical prophecy, he never develops the idea of expiation. His distinctive doctrine (to put it with impossible brevity) is that in dying Christ both accomplished the final 'descent' of the Son of God from heaven, and was 'lifted up' in glory, thereby frustrating the powers of evil, releasing the life that was in Him to dwell in believers, and drawing all men into the unity of the divine love (see John iii. 13-17, vi. 48-51, xii. 23-4, 31-3, xvii. 19-23). Of all this there is nothing in the Epistle.

(iii) The conception of the Spirit in the Epistle remains within the limits of primitive or popular belief (iii. 24, iv. 6, iv. 13, v. 6-8; see notes, pp. 95-9, 128). There is no trace of the high 'Johannine' doctrine which is found in the Gospel. (John iii. 5-8, iv. 23-4, vi. 63, and especially xiv. 15-17, 25-6, xv. 26, xvi. 7-15). It is particularly remarkable that although one of the leading ideas of the Epistle is the divine generation of believers (iii. 1-2, 9, v. 1, etc., see notes), it has no allusion—at any rate no direct allusion—to the function of the Spirit in regeneration as set forth in John iii. 5-8.

Eschatology, the Atonement, the Holy Spirit: these are certainly no minor themes in Christian theology. In all three the First Epistle of John represents an outlook widely different from that of the Fourth Gospel. When this difference is added to those previously noted, the question arises acutely: Is it likely that these two works are the product of a single mind?

It is, of course, true that authors change their style with the

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passage of years, or even in response to changes of circumstance; it is also true that an active mind continues to modify its ideas, often quite substantially, while retaining certain fundamental characteristics. It may be that the differences we have been considering can be so accounted for. It is however not very easy to frame a plausible hypothesis. It is often suggested that the inferior mental powers manifest in the Epistle are due to increasing years. In that case we should have to suppose that the Evangelist not only declined in powers of thought and expression (though still capable of flashes of creative insight), but also reverted in various respects to a stage of religious thought which at the time of his major work he had left behind. On the other hand, if we have regard to the relatively primitive character of some of the ideas in the Epistle, it might be suggested that it was the product of its author's 'prentice hand, and the Gospel of his maturity. We should then think of the massive theology of the Fourth Gospel as having its starting point in the simpler ideas of the Epistle; and of the somewhat unguarded concessions to Hellenistic thought which we have noted in the Epistle as having been corrected by the author's more mature mind. It is, however, difficult to take this view, since there are places where the argument of the Epistle is hardly to be understood without reference to fuller statements in the Gospel (see especially ii. 7-8, iii. 8-15, v. 9-10, and notes). It is in fact difficult to set aside the impression, which is confirmed by a very wide consensus of scholars, that the Gospel is the earlier work and is presupposed in the Epistle. (Reference may be made to the full discussion in Brooke's Introduction in the *International Critical Commentary*, pp. xix-xxvii; which seems conclusive on this point.)

If the Fourth Gospel is regarded, with a whole school of critics, as the work of several hands, it might be suggested that the author of the Epistle had a part in its composition; and such an hypothesis might account for some of the facts. But the tide of criticism seems to be setting away from separatist theories. It seems almost certain that the Gospel bears all through (apart from possible minor and occasional editorial

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touches, and in spite of the possible use of various sources) the stamp of a single mind; and in view of the facts we have noted, it is difficult to find the same mind at work in the Epistle. Again, if the theory won its way, that the Fourth Gospel was written originally in Aramaic, a place might be found for the author of the Epistle as translator. But this theory is improbable, and the hypothesis based upon it has difficulties of its own. It may prove possible to frame some other hypothesis, which will admit identity of authorship and yet account convincingly for the deep-lying differences. In such matters strict proof is seldom attainable.

The simplest hypothesis, however, seems to be that the author of the Epistle was a disciple of the Evangelist and a student of his work. He is not a mere imitator, but he has become possessed by certain of his master's ideas, though not going the whole way with him; and he has caught something of his style and manner, though with a difference. The phenomenon is not unfamiliar. In our own time there is an influential school of theologians who draw their inspiration from one great teacher, Dr. Karl Barth (*quem honoris causa nomino*). They are not all slavish followers, by any means. Some of them disagree with their master on some points, or develop his ideas in ways which he would not acknowledge. But the stamp of his mind is upon them. One may observe, sometimes not without amusement, how they repeat his characteristic expressions, and overwork his favourite turns of phrase. They do not set out to imitate, but apparently they cannot help themselves. It may be that the relation of the author of the Epistle to the Evangelist was similar.

The question of authorship is not of the first importance. The present commentary, however, is written upon the assumption that the First Epistle of John best reveals its character and significance when it is not treated as a great author's second thoughts, but allowed to speak for itself. It is in any case not merely derivative. It represents a definite stage towards that central or normal Christianity which emerged from the New Testament period.

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V. CHARACTER AND CONTENTS OF THE SECOND AND THIRD EPISTLES

The Second Epistle has the form of a private letter. This form however seems to be a thin disguise for a pastoral epistle addressed to a Christian congregation by a person of weight and authority who describes himself as 'The Presbyter' (see notes on verse 1).

After a general exhortation to the congregation to maintain right belief and Christian charity, the writer warns his readers specifically against certain persons who are carrying on propaganda on behalf of an 'advanced' or progressive type of Christian theology (as they call it), which, however, involves the denial of the reality of Christ's incarnation. The recipients of the letter are assumed to be instructed in the orthodox 'doctrine of Christ.' They are to stand firmly by this doctrine, which alone provides the basis for a genuinely Christian life and experience. Any professedly 'advanced' doctrines are to be tested by this norm. If any wandering missionary appears, whose teaching fails to stand this test, he is to be excluded from Church fellowship, and even from the most elementary social intercourse.

The verses which prescribe this rigorous boycott of heretics (10-11) are the only portion of the epistle (except the epistolary introduction and conclusion) which adds anything of substance to what is contained in 1 John. For the rest, it simply echoes the teaching of that epistle in brief, repeating both its emphasis upon the 'commandment' of love, or charity, and its characterization of the heretical teachers and their doctrine. The situation contemplated in the two writings is similar, but apparently not identical. The Second Epistle appears to announce the existence of a widespread movement of heretical propaganda as if it were something quite new to the church addressed. It is not certain that the propagandists have yet reached this church, but *if* any heretical teacher should appear, the letter will tell them how to proceed (verses 7, 10). In the First Epistle, on the other hand, we have the impression (though there is no unequivocal statement) that the recipients

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of the letter are already in the thick of the controversy. It does not, however, seem plausible to explain the difference on the ground that 1 John is later than 2 John, because the ideas briefly indicated in 2 John need for their understanding the fuller exposition given in the longer writing. In particular, the term 'antichrist' is thrown out without any explanation (verse 7), and we could hardly understand what lies behind it without the exposition in 1 John ii. 18, iv. 1-6; and the play upon the idea of the 'new commandment' (verse 5) gains point if it is referred back to 1 John ii. 7-8. The relation of the two writings remains enigmatic.

The Third Epistle has an entirely different character. It is, quite obviously, a genuine piece of personal correspondence. How closely it follows the conventions of first-century letter-writing is illustrated in the notes. The Presbyter, his friend Gaius, his opponent Diotrophes, and even the briefly mentioned Demetrius, stand before us as individuals, acting their parts in a dramatic situation. The letter gives us a vivid glimpse of a moment in the life of the Church full of human interest, and possibly of historical importance. Unfortunately the glimpse is so brief, the letter so isolated, that we cannot define precisely the issues at stake in the conflict between Diotrophes and the Presbyter. Clearly enough, the Presbyter is in a position of authority and responsibility, with a group of churches (it would appear) under his charge. Travelling agents commissioned by him move among the churches and carry the Gospel to the pagan population with the financial and moral support of the Christian communities of the neighbourhood. In one church, however, they have met with a rebuff. Some of its members wished to welcome them, but others were strongly opposed to their reception. The opposition was led by Diotrophes, whom we see, through the eyes of the Presbyter, as an ambitious demagogue with a turn for vituperative rhetoric. The occasion became a trial of strength between Diotrophes and the Presbyter; and Diotrophes won. The party which wished to welcome the missionaries was overborne, and its members driven from the church, whether by formal excommunication or by mere mob violence. The travellers, thus turned adrift,

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seem to have postponed their further missionary journeys and returned to the Presbyter to report.

This brings us to the situation in which 3 John was written. The Presbyter, perturbed by what he hears from the missionaries, and incensed by the discourtesy they (and he as their sponsor) have received from Diotrephes, plans to visit the offending church as soon as possible, to deal with the disturbances. Meanwhile, he writes a letter to the congregation, but, suspecting that Diotrephes will either prevent the letter from reaching its members, or induce them to ignore it, he writes at the same time the letter now before us. It is addressed to a loyal supporter named Gaius, and entrusted (apparently) to Demetrius, a man of unquestioned integrity, universally respected, and completely in the Presbyter's confidence. With him travel the rejected missionaries (of whom indeed Demetrius may have been one). They had previously been generously entertained by Gaius (whether before their ill-starred encounter with Diotrephes, or after he had persuaded the church to turn them adrift, is not clear). They are now to resume their interrupted mission, and the Presbyter appeals to Gaius, as his most trustworthy adherent in those parts, to take responsibility for their needs; and at the same time apprises him of the deplorable development of Diotrephes' opposition.

The letter, which is written under the stress of strong emotion, undesignedly gives us a portrait of Gaius: a consistent Christian, generous and loyal, but, just possibly, a little susceptible to influence, since the Presbyter, after describing Diotrephes' outrageous conduct, feels it necessary to add: *Beloved, do not imitate evil, but good.*

Such is the background, and the purport, of the letter. It is tantalizing to have this sudden vivid glimpse, and to learn nothing of what preceded or followed. For lack of such information many points must remain uncertain. There is nothing to indicate any connection with the problem of heretical teaching towards which the other two epistles are directed. There is no hint that Diotrephes was unorthodox, though the Presbyter (we must suppose) would hardly have failed to mention a fact, if it had been a fact, so much to his opponent's discredit. The

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conflict, to all appearance, does not turn upon doctrine, but upon the question of authority. It is probably an episode (as suggested in the notes) in the process through which (not without tensions and difficulties) the Church passed out of the 'missionary' phase, in which the authority of the apostles and their immediate representatives was paramount, to the phase of local episcopacy which we find established in the course of the second century.

In the absence of anything like cross-references (for the similarities between the epistolary introduction and conclusion of 2 and 3 John are merely a matter of a writer's idiosyncrasy modifying current epistolary conventions) it is not profitable to attempt any connection between 3 John and the other Johannine epistles. It remains an isolated item in a correspondence of which the ecclesiastical historian would gladly have had more.

VI. CRITICAL PROBLEMS OF THE SECOND AND THIRD EPISTLES

The external evidence, as we have seen, shows that in ancient times there was no unanimous or consistent tradition of the lesser Johannine epistles (pp. xv-xvi). The judgment that they were all three from one hand, and canonical, did not prevail until a late period. In some quarters 1 and 2 John formed a pair, and 3 John was ignored. In other quarters 2 and 3 John formed a pair, and were attributed to an author different from the writer of 1 John. We have now to enquire what evidence can be gleaned from the epistles themselves regarding their relations with one another and with the major Johannine writings.

The Second Epistle, as we have seen, is largely made up of material parallel with the First. Thus, verse 5 is parallel with 1 John ii. 7, verse 6 with 1 John v. 3; in verse 9 the peculiar expression, **possesses both the Father and the Son**, recalls 1 John ii. 23, and in verse 12 the concluding phrase recalls 1 John i. 4, as well as John xv. 11, xvi. 24.

At the same time there are some striking parallels with passages in the Fourth Gospel which have no parallel in 1 John. In the following list, the Greek has been translated literally,

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since the Moffatt translation tends to disguise similarities by variant renderings.

2 John

1. 'who know the truth.'
2. 'the truth which . . . will be with us for ever.'
4. 'as we received commandment from the Father.'
8. 'that you may receive a full reward.'
9. 'everyone who . . . does not remain in the doctrine of Christ.'

John

- viii. 32, 'you will know the truth' (the same verb: 1 John ii. 21 has a different verb).
- xiv. 16-17, 'He will give you another Paraclete to be with you for ever, the Spirit of truth.'
- x. 18, 'this commandment I received from my Father' (the expression 'to receive a commandment' does not occur in 1 John).
- iv. 36, 'the reaper is receiving a reward' (the verb in 2 John is a compound form of the verb in John. The idea of 'reward' does not appear in 1 John).
- viii. 31, 'if you remain in my word, you will really be my disciples.'

If now we examine the actual vocabulary of 2 John, we arrive at the following results. The total number of different words used in this brief writing is 84. Some 20 of these we may ignore, as too commonplace to call for notice ('the,' 'and,' 'not,' and the like). Of the remaining 64 significant words, there are 4 which are not found in the New Testament except in Johannine writings. Of these, two are peculiar to 2 John ('lady' and 'paper'); one is common to 2 and 3 John ('ink'), and one is common to 1 and 2 John ('antichrist'). Only one of these peculiar words has any theological significance. Of the remaining 60 words, 9 are not found either in 1 John or in the Fourth Gospel (according to the best text), though 3 of them occur in 3 John; and 16 are found in the Fourth Gospel, but not in 1 John.

Leaving these figures for the moment, we turn to 3 John. Here parallels to the other Johannine writings are less striking.

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The greeting in verse 1 is similar to 2 John 1, and the epistolary conclusion in 13-14 is similar to 2 John 12-13. The substance of verse 11 might be regarded as a brief summary of the teaching of 1 John iii. 4-10, but apart from this there is little that recalls the First Epistle. The repeated emphasis on 'truth' and 'love' is broadly Johannine, but not characteristic of any one writing. The most striking parallel with the Fourth Gospel is in verse 12: its first clause is shaped like John xv. 27a, and its second clause recalls the editorial note in John xxi. 24, which is in any case not by the Evangelist, but in turn recalls, though more remotely, John xix. 35. To these we may add the not very striking similarity of 3 John 3 to John xviii. 37, and of 3 John 4 to John xv. 13 (which, however, uses a different, and more correct, grammatical form of the word 'greater'). These parallels do not go very far, but so far as they go, they suggest certain habits of speech rather than deliberate imitation of the Fourth Gospel.

Analysis of the vocabulary of 3 John shows the following results. The total number of words used is 99, or 78 significant words. Of these, 23 are not found either in 1 John or in the Fourth Gospel, 4 of them being peculiar to 3 John, 1 common to 2 and 3 John, and 2 common to both these epistles and other New Testament writings. Of the rest, there are 5 words which are found in the Fourth Gospel but not in 1 John, and one which is found in 1 John, but not in the Fourth Gospel.

In dealing with such extremely short writings, linguistic *data* must be used with caution, but so far as they go, they do not, *prima facie*, suggest a very close relation between 2 and 3 John over against 1 John. The 'non-Johannine' words (i.e. words not found either in John or in 1 John) which they have in common are practically confined to the epistolary introductions and conclusions, where there is, naturally, no basis of comparison with the First Epistle or the Fourth Gospel. The total number of significant 'non-Johannine' words in 2 John amounts to just under 20 per cent.; in 3 John, to almost exactly 30 per cent. 3 John is therefore appreciably less 'Johannine' in its vocabulary than 2 John. The Third Epistle again has only one passage substantially parallel with 1 John, over

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against a whole series of parallels in the Second Epistle. Apart from these close echoes of 1 John, the Second Epistle has a vocabulary nearer to that of the Fourth Gospel than to that of 1 John, and so has 3 John, though in a lesser degree. All three may fairly be said to have a recognizably Johannine colouring, but the linguistic phenomena would not be inconsistent with either of the critical views held in ancient times, which separate one or both of the lesser epistles from the major Johannine writings, though they do not lend decisive support to either of them.

Some modern critics, following those ancients who separated the Second and Third Epistles from the First, and attributed them to a different author, have suggested the theory that the 'Presbyter' who wrote these two short letters is no other than the 'John' who wrote the Revelation (see Moffatt, *Introduction to the New Testament*, 1912, pp. 479-82, 513-14). It is true that the Apocalypticist describes himself not as a 'presbyter,' but (by implication) as a 'prophet' (Rev. i. 3, xxii. 9). There is, however, no reason why the Presbyter may not have had the gift and repute of prophecy; and in any case both works proceed from someone who, in whatever capacity, was conscious of pastoral responsibility and authority over a group of churches, and probably a group of churches in the same province. But this theory is no longer tenable after R. H. Charles's study of the language of the Revelation in the Introduction to his Commentary on that work (*International Critical Commentary*), Vol. I. pp. xxix-xlv, which shows conclusively that, whatever differences of style and language there may be among the Johannine Epistles and Gospel, they form a definite group in contrast to the Revelation, and that it is in the highest degree improbable (not to say impossible) that the Apocalypticist could have written any of them.

Let us then attempt to estimate probabilities. We may start with 3 John, which is unquestionably a genuine private letter. Although it is not attested, probably, before the third century, there is no likelihood that it is a late fiction. It is so brief, and so unimportant in content, that we can well understand that there were few occasions for quoting it, but we could not

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understand why anyone should have taken the trouble to fabricate it. It is a writing with a distinctive vocabulary of its own, largely independent of that of the First Epistle and the Fourth Gospel, and yet with certain turns of expression sufficiently marked and numerous to indicate its affinity with the Johannine group of writings. There is little to suggest direct dependance upon either the Gospel or the First Epistle. There is, in fact, only one verse (11) which directly recalls the teaching of either; and that is far from being a quotation or repetition. The epistle is the spontaneous composition of a writer who, even in the unconstrained self-expression of private correspondence, slipped naturally into 'Johannine' turns of speech from time to time. Such a writer might be either (a) the Fourth Evangelist, or (b) the author of 1 John, or (c) a member of the Johannine school, influenced by one or both of these writers. In any case, however, he bore high authority and responsibility in the Church. He commissioned missionaries and planned for their support, and he expected to have his directions carried out by the various congregations in his region. He was in fact (if the interpretation given in the commentary is correct) one of the 'elders' or 'presbyters' who in the sub-apostolic age carried on the tradition of apostolic authority. Such a figure can hardly be identified with a subordinate member of a Johannine school.

The Second Epistle professes to be the work of the same author, and we must choose between accepting this claim, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, regarding the work as a deliberate fiction. Certainly 2 John does not make the same impression of spontaneity as 3 John. A large part of its contents (verses 5-7) is a sort of résumé of teaching given in 1 John, largely in the same phrases, and in a form which seems to presuppose the longer writing. At the same time the description of the false teaching in verse 7 (see commentary) differs curiously in one word from the corresponding description in 1 John. Either it is a different heresy, which seems scarcely credible, or the author of 2 John has used the Greek verb loosely, although in 1 John it is used with perfect idiomatic correctness. The epistolary opening and close are so very like

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those of 3 John that we should naturally suppose them the work of the same author, unless it is a case of deliberate fabrication. But what is the purpose of the mystification about the 'elect Lady,' her 'sister' and her 'children'? If the Presbyter could be so frank and downright in 3 John, why must he beat about the bush in the companion epistle? If it is a genuine letter from the Presbyter to a church for which he felt a special affection (as verse 1 implies), it is strange that the individuality of the church does not emerge in a single syllable. The precepts (apart from the *ad hoc* regulations about heretics) are such as might be addressed by any Christian minister to any group of Christians at any time, whether he knew them personally or not.

There is here much to suggest the possibility that 2 John is an imitation composed by a writer who had both 1 John and 3 John before him. His motive might have been to claim the authority of the Presbyter for the boycott of heretics, which is his sole substantial addition to material present also in the other two epistles.

If, however, we assume an imitator, we must confess that he has done his work with rare skill. As the foregoing analysis of the language shows, he keeps well within the limits of 'Johannine' vocabulary, with only the modicum of 'non-Johannine' words which we should expect in a free composition. In verses 5-7 this would be sufficiently accounted for by direct imitation of 1 John, but elsewhere the choice of words is nearer to that of the Fourth Gospel, and there are several distinct echoes of phrases in the Gospel, which appear on examination more like unconscious habits of speech than deliberate imitation.

Upon internal grounds, therefore, the hypothesis of fiction falls short of complete plausibility. The external evidence confronts it with a more serious difficulty. Slight as this evidence is, it makes it clear that 2 John obtained relatively early recognition, at least in some quarters, while the reception of 3 John was late and doubtful in any area covered by our evidence. It would indeed be paradoxical if a genuine letter of the Presbyter failed of recognition while a fictitious imitation was canonized.

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The simplest hypothesis seems to be that 2 John is, in spite of differences, a genuine work of the author of 3 John. But it is also closely related to 1 John, much more closely than is 3 John, and forms in some sort a link between these two writings. The internal evidence left it open whether the author of 3 John was the Fourth Evangelist, or the author of 1 John, or a disciple of one or both of these. If, however, we were right in distinguishing the author of 1 John from the Fourth Evangelist, we must now eliminate the Evangelist from the list of possible authors of the two lesser epistles, since 2 John seems to be, in some sense, dependent on 1 John, and the Evangelist cannot be thought to have followed so closely the work of one who (on our theory) was his disciple. Of the remaining two possibilities, it seems that we must prefer the identification of the Presbyter with the author of 1 John, on the ground that his dignity and authority appear to be in no way inferior.

The evidence is far from satisfactory, but on the whole the best tentative conclusion would seem to be that all three Johannine epistles are the work of the 'Presbyter,' who is to be distinguished from the Fourth Evangelist. 1 John may be supposed to have the character of a circular epistle, addressed to a fairly wide Christian public; 2 John is addressed to some particular local congregation; and 3 John is a private letter to a friend, albeit on church affairs. 1 and 2 John may have been written within a very short time, and deal with successive stages of a single situation. 3 John deals with an entirely different situation, and may have been separated from the others by a considerable lapse of time. These considerations may suffice to account for the differences which have led some ancient and some modern critics to separate one or both of the lesser epistles from 1 John.

VII. PLACE, DATE AND AUTHORSHIP OF THE JOHANNINE EPISTLES

The writer is not named in the text of the epistles; nor do they indicate either the place from which, or the place to which, they were sent.

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The first evidence of the existence of Johannine epistles comes, as we have seen, from the province of Asia, in the writings of Polycarp and Papias, to whom we may add Irenaeus, a native of the same province (pp. xi-xiii). This suggests *prima facie* that they belonged originally to that province, and this view is confirmed by the peculiar use of the title 'Presbyter,' which again appears to be associated with the province of Asia (see notes on 2 John 1). There is nothing which conflicts with the conclusion that these writings originated in that province; and indeed few would question this conclusion, even if they would place the origin of the Fourth Gospel elsewhere.

The dating of the epistles depends too largely upon some unsolved problems in the chronology of early Christian literature to admit of certain or precise determination. We need not indeed assume that all three are strictly contemporary. If one were to trust mere impressions, the Third Epistle might be thought to betray a more vigorous, the First Epistle a riper age. But in any case the difference of time cannot be great. The following points may be noted:

(a) The external evidence gives us, in Polycarp and Papias, a *terminus ante quem* which is in no case later than A.D. 140, and may be some twenty years earlier.

(b) The 'Presbyters,' representing the sub-apostolic generation, seem to belong to the period round about the reign of Trajan (A.D. 98-117), though some of them must have survived later.

(c) The ecclesiastical situation in the province of Asia, as represented in these epistles, seems to be earlier than the situation represented in the Epistles of Ignatius, A.D. 115 (see notes on 3 John). The Pastoral Epistles, which reflect conditions in the same provinces some time before Ignatius (since he seems to quote them), are of uncertain date. The Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians (about A.D. 96) seems to reflect a situation at Corinth comparable with that presupposed in our epistles.

(d) The First Epistle is probably later than the Fourth Gospel; but again this is a writing of uncertain date. If the

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date of 1 John could be fixed, it would help towards the dating of the Gospel.

(e) Little can be said of the probable date of the particular doctrinal controversy with which 1 and 2 John are concerned. If these epistles could be dated, we should have a much-needed fixed point in tracing the development of Gnosticism.

(f) The epistles do not seem to belong to a period of persecution. The Church indeed is unpopular (1 John iii. 13), though it is implied that travelling missionaries might, if they would, look for subscriptions from friendly pagans (3 John 7). The danger which the Presbyter fears is that of a too ready accommodation with pagan thought and ways. The general tone of the epistles offers the strongest contrast to that of the Revelation, which shows us a Church enduring severe persecution and looking forward to yet worse. If we reflect that these epistles were written in the same province of Asia, and very likely addressed in part to the same churches, it is impossible to believe that they belong to the same period. We may take it for granted that the Revelation belongs to the reign of Domitian. The extreme tension which it reflects was relieved by his death and the accession of Nerva in 96, which began a period of relative toleration. The Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians is thought to have been written immediately after the close of the persecution. We might perhaps imagine that the disturbances at Corinth with which Clement deals, and the recalcitrance of Diotrephes at the unnamed Asian church, were both symptoms of a certain spirit of unrest in a society which had recently suffered under acute repression, and now emerged to face a new set of conditions. On the other hand, a date before Domitian's persecution is not excluded for the Johannine epistles. Only it is not clear that the Church was ever free from the immediate menace of persecution all through the Flavian period. The Epistle to the Hebrews, which is certainly pre-Domitianic (since it is quoted by Clement), is aimed at strengthening its readers to endure a fresh attack. On the whole, a post-Domitianic date seems to fit the other indications better, slight and inconclusive as they are.

Our tentative conclusion, therefore, is that the three

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Johannine Epistles were written in the Province of Asia, between A.D. 96 and 110 (or thereabouts), by one of the 'Presbyters' who are known to have lived in that province at that period.

This conclusion rests upon probable arguments from internal and external evidence. If we attempt to go further, and to identify the anonymous author of these epistles with some known individual, we have little but surmise to go upon. It is unlikely that he is to be identified with John the Apostle, the son of Zebedee. The very use of the title 'presbyter' is against it. It is true that Papias (who, whether or not he merited Eusebius's verdict, 'a person of quite small intelligence,' was an uncommonly clumsy writer) expresses himself so loosely in the crucial passage that it would be possible to hold that he intended to include apostles in the wider class of presbyters; but we should probably be right in understanding him to distinguish them. Irenaeus's formula, 'the Presbyters, disciples of the Apostles,' is clear (see note on 3 John 1). The use of the term 'fellow-presbyter' by an apostle (or by a writer who impersonates an apostle, if that view is preferred) in 1 Pet. v. 1 belongs to a different context, and cannot usefully be cited as a parallel. The argument of 3 John turns altogether upon the question of the writer's authority. Can we doubt that if he had possessed the apostolic dignity, he would have flung out a defiant 'John, apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God,' and reduced Diotrephes to silence?

The Presbyters are for us scarcely individual figures. Papias names only one explicitly, the Presbyter John. Since Irenaeus (who derives from the Asian tradition of Polycarp and Papias) cites both 1 John and 2 John under the name of 'John' (though he meant the Apostle), it is an easy conjecture that the true author is John the Presbyter (upon whom see G. N. C. Macgregor in Moffatt Commentary on *John*, pp. l-lxii). Of this John we know singularly little. He is understood to have resided at Ephesus in the province of Asia, where his tomb (along with that of John the Apostle) was shown in the third century. Papias calls him a 'disciple of the Lord,' meaning apparently that he was a survivor of the group who had heard

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and followed Jesus in His lifetime. If so, he would have been a very old man at the date we have assigned to the epistles. It is perhaps significant that Irenaeus says that 'John the disciple of the Lord' survived to the time of Trajan, and was known to 'the Presbyters' in Asia (*Adversus Haereses*, II. 33. 3, III. 3. 4). Since we are now indulging in conjecture, there is no harm in the suggestion (which has often been made) that there may be some confusion here. Irenaeus, no doubt, meant John the Apostle, but it is not impossible that the long-lived disciple was actually not an apostolic associate of the Presbyters of Asia, but one of them—namely, John the Presbyter. If so, it is also possible that the 'John' of whom Irenaeus remembered hearing Polycarp speak was, once again, not the Apostle, but the Presbyter; and that it is the Presbyter, not the Apostle, who appears in tradition as the organizer of the episcopate in Asia. To pile conjecture upon conjecture, it may be that some of the anecdotes told of John of Ephesus refer to the Presbyter. It has been pointed out in the notes on 2 John 10-11 that the story of Cerinthus at the baths would at least fit the character of the author of that epistle; and it certainly looks as if it was the author of 1 John who, when in extreme old age he was carried to church, had only one sermon to preach: 'Little children, love one another' (Jerome, *Commentary on Galatians*, vi. 10).

We are here, it must be repeated, in the realm of pure conjecture. It is quite possible that the shadowy figure of John the Presbyter may be brought to life along these lines, and recognized as the author of these epistles, but evidence is lacking to turn the possibility into a probability. Two observations should be made. First, if the author is John the Presbyter, and if he was (as Papias seems to say) a personal disciple of the Lord, he cannot have been much less than twenty years of age in A.D. 30, and was therefore not far short of ninety in the early years of Trajan (assuming that he is the John who survived till that Emperor's reign). The First Epistle, even if it be thought to show something less than the vigour of a man in the prime of life, would be an astonishing performance for one of nearly ninety; and the journeys contemplated in

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2 and 3 John would probably be beyond his powers. If therefore the epistles are attributed to John the Presbyter, the pre-Domitianic date must be preferred. Secondly, if the arguments adduced above (pp. xlvii-lvi) are accepted as leading to a distinction between the author of 1 John and the Fourth Evangelist, then, obviously, the epistles can be attributed to the Presbyter John only at the cost of withdrawing his candidature for the authorship of the Fourth Gospel, which at the present time is widely favoured, and is approved in the Commentary on the Gospel according to John in this series.

We must confess that we do not know who our Presbyter was. It does not greatly matter. He has left us a recognizable self-portrait in his three epistles. If we cannot affix a famous name to the portrait, we know what manner of man he was, what he taught about faith and duty, and what part he played at a critical moment in the history of the Church.

THE FIRST EPISTLE OF JOHN

EXORDIUM

(i. 1-4)

THEME AND PURPOSE OF THE EPISTLE

i.

It is of what existed from the very beginning, of what we 1
heard with our ears,¹ of what we saw with our eyes, of
what we witnessed and touched with our own hands, it is
of the Logos of Life (the Life has appeared; we saw it, 2
we testify to it, we bring you word of that eternal Life
which existed with the Father and was disclosed to us)—
it is of what we saw and heard that we bring you word, 3
so that you may share our fellowship; and our fellowship
is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ. We are 4
writing this to you that our joy may be complete.

The opening sentence of the Epistle, extending to the end of verse 3, is exceedingly complex. The writer has tried to pack into it more than a single sentence can well contain, at the cost of clarity. The Moffatt version smoothes over some difficulties of construction (as one must do if the translation is to be readable), and gives a fairly clear sense, which may be that intended by the author.

According to this way of taking the sentence, **what existed from the very beginning, what we heard, what we saw with our eyes, what we witnessed and touched with our own hands,** is identical with the Logos of Life. The Greek word Logos is retained untranslated because it is taken to be a technical term, as in the Prologue to the Fourth Gospel, where it is said that **the Logos existed in the very beginning, and that in him life lay; that he became flesh, and that we beheld his glory.** If our present passage is held to be moulded on the lines of the Prologue, the first clause of verse 1 may be referred to the pre-incarnate Logos, and the following three clauses to

¹ The words 'with our ears' are not found in the MSS. and seem to have been interpolated here by inadvertence.

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the incarnate Logos, that is to say, 'the Jesus of history, who, as a Man among men, could be seen, heard and touched. So much for verse 1. In verse 2 there is a certain shift of expression. The Fourth Gospel says that the Logos was **with God in the very beginning**, and implies that He **was disclosed to us** in the Incarnation (though the actual verb here rendered 'disclosed' is not used in the Fourth Gospel in this context). In our present passage it is not the Logos, but the Life, that **existed with the Father and was disclosed to us**. The difference may be more apparent than real. In John i. 9-13 it is not easy to say which clauses have the Logos for their formal subject, and which, the Light that was in the Logos. It seems clear that since for the Evangelist the Logos has the aspects (as we might put it) of life and light, it makes little difference to the sense whether we speak, on the one hand, of the Light, or the Life, or on the other hand of the Logos in His aspect of light or of life. And so here, when the writer says that the Life was with God and was disclosed to us, we need not suppose that he means anything substantially different from what is said in the Prologue to the Fourth Gospel.

According to the Moffatt rendering, then, our author starts by saying that it is his intention to speak of Christ as the eternal Logos, in whom was life—indeed, who is Himself the Life—and who as such existed in union with God the Father before all time, and was incarnate in time and so became the Object of sensible experience.

It is, however, not certain that this is precisely what the author means, or, in particular, that he is following so closely the tenor of the Prologue to the Fourth Gospel. It will be well to make a fresh start with a literal translation of verses 1-3a. The sentence is not good Greek, and it is only by paraphrase that it can be rendered into good English. Word for word it reads as follows:

'That which was from the beginning; that which we have heard; that which we have seen with our eyes; that which we observed and our hands felt—concerning the word of life—and the life was manifested, and we have seen and bear

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witness and announce to you the eternal life which was with the Father and was manifested to us—that which we have seen and heard we announce to you also.’

In this grammatical tangle one thing is clear which the Moffatt version has disguised in the interest of smoothness—namely, that the clause ‘concerning the word of life’ is not in the same construction as the preceding clauses. It is of course possible that the author changed the construction merely for the sake of variety. But *prima facie* the clause ‘concerning the word of life’ indicates the *theme* of the announcement, and the clauses ‘that which was from the beginning . . . our hands felt’ state the *contents* of the announcement. ‘That which we have heard concerning the word of life’ would be a perfectly straightforward and perspicuous expression, and although the author has expanded the relative clause by various additions, the fundamental structure of the sentence is not altered by them, though the meaning is significantly enlarged. He is announcing (he says) to his readers what is known from direct evidence to be true about the word of life; what has always (‘from the beginning’) been true about the word of life. By thus distinguishing the expression ‘the word of life’ (as giving the theme of the announcement) from the clauses beginning ‘that which . . .’ (as giving the contents of the announcement) we avoid the awkward necessity of taking the neuter pronouns (neuter in Greek and in English) in reference to Christ as the Logos. The Greek word *logos* is masculine, and if Christ is meant, masculine pronouns would be required in either language.

This leads to the question whether the term *logos* is here to be taken in the technical sense which it is supposed to bear in John i. 1, 14, or whether some less specialized sense of *logos* is intended. In the former case, it would be well to preserve the Greek term in translation (as Moffatt has done); in the latter case, an English equivalent should be used.

The Greek word *logos* has several meanings, but the two meanings which come into question here are (a) ‘word,’ and (b) ‘reason’ or ‘thought.’ For the Greek these two were not so

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distinct as they are for us. *Logos* as 'word' is in any case not mere speech, but rational speech; not mere utterance, but the utterance of a meaning; and *logos* as 'reason' is not the reasoning faculty, but a rational content of thought, articulate and fit for utterance; the meaning which a word expresses. The Stoics used *logos* also for the rational principle immanent in the universe, conceived as the sum of a plurality of *logoi*, by virtue of which things are what they are. Very many thinkers, of different schools, came under the influence of Stoic metaphysics. Among them was Philo the Jew, whose Logos-doctrine has so greatly influenced Christian theology. But Philo is always aware that *logos* also means 'word,' and that the Word of the Lord in the Old Testament is the medium both of creation and of revelation. In the New Testament (apart from our present passage) the prologue to the Fourth Gospel is the only place where it is plausible to recognize the 'metaphysical' use of the term *logos*. It seems, however, probable that the immediate background of the Prologue is the biblical concept of the Word of the Lord by which the heavens were made (John i. 3; Gen. i. *passim*; Ps. xxxiii. 6; Wisd. ix. 1), and which came to God's people through the prophets (John i. 11; cf. O.T. *passim*); the Word of God which is also His Law (Isa. ii. 3, etc.; Ps. cxix.); which in turn is equated with the creative, immanent and revealing Wisdom of God (Prov. viii. 22-31; Wisd. vii. 22-viii. 1; Ecclus. xxiv. 23). More remotely in the background is the Stoic *logos* as the immanent principle, or meaning, of the universe, a conception (not altogether unlike that of Wisdom) which no doubt reached the Evangelist through Hellenistic Judaism, in a form similar to that which is familiar to us from Philo. The translation 'word,' though it is narrower in meaning than the Greek *logos*, is justified, even in John i. 1-14, because it recalls the all-important Old Testament background, and here it is the natural rendering. We may read 'the word of life,' leaving open for the moment the question of the precise connotation of the term in this context.

Now the expression 'word of life' occurs in Phil. ii. 16: **Hold fast the word of life.** The definite article is not expressed in the original, but this need not be significant, and the Moffatt

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translation (which conforms to the A.V. and R.V.) is probably justified. If we insisted on the absence of the article, the meaning would be a message or announcement of life, or a promise of life (cf. 2 Tim. i. 1); and in any case *the* word of life (*par excellence*) could be no other than the Gospel, by which life and immortality are brought to light (2 Tim. i. 10). Similarly in Acts v. 20, 'the words of this life' means 'this Gospel.' Pauline and Lucan usage is not decisive for a Johannine passage, but in this case we have grounds for saying that Johannine usage agrees. In John vi. 68 the words of Christ are **words of eternal life**. These words (*rhēmata*) it is elsewhere explained, are derived from God, and are collectively the Word (*logos*) of God, which is truth, and which Christ gives to men (John xvii. 6-8, 14, 17). In view of this, it may appear almost accidental that the expression 'the word of life' does not occur in the Fourth Gospel. If it had appeared, it is fairly clear what its meaning would have been. It would be in accord with Johannine ideas to understand 'the word of life' in our present passage as the life-giving Word of God which came to men through Christ and is embodied in the Gospel.

Following this line of interpretation, we should understand the author to mean that his theme is the Gospel, and that he is stating, in the first place, what has always¹ been true about it (and not any innovation or afterthought), and, in the second place, what can be attested upon the immediate evidence of the senses (and not some airy speculation or **fabricated fable**; cf. 2 Pet. i. 16).

Having defined the Gospel as the Word of Life, he now adds, in parenthesis, that by 'life' he does not mean any abstract idea, but the divine reality disclosed to men in the incarnate Christ, whose appearance on earth is a fact attested by eye-witnesses. It is in this sense (he proceeds) that he announces eternal life—namely, by bearing witness to Christ, in whom the

¹ 'From the very beginning.' If the passage is understood in this way it is not necessary to determine whether 'the beginning' here is the absolute Beginning of the universe (as in ii. 13-14) or the beginning of the preaching of the Gospel (as in ii. 7, 24, iii. 11). The Gospel is by its nature, as the Word of God, an 'eternal Gospel' (Rev. xiv. 6). The emphasis is upon the unchanged, original content of the Gospel, over against novel forms of doctrine.

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divine life which existed from all eternity was made accessible to human knowledge.

- 3^a Having made this explanation, the author resumes his interrupted sentence with a repetition of some words from the opening clause, and brings it to a conclusion: it is of **what we saw and heard that we bring you word**. Whatever may be the uncertainties regarding the precise construction of the involved sentence, its general purport is now clear. Faced with novel doctrines of a speculative cast, the author recalls his readers to the unchanging apostolic Gospel, which is the Word of God, and to its attestation by eyewitnesses of the historical facts about Jesus Christ. We shall find that this appeal to the primitive Gospel and this insistence upon the historical reality of the Incarnation, recur all through the Epistle.

- 3^b He now passes on to a statement of his purpose in writing. Why is he thus recalling them to the Gospel and its factual truth? **So that you may share our fellowship**. The word *fellowship* renders a scarcely translatable Greek word, *koinōnia*, which is often rendered 'communion.' Neither English word is wholly adequate to convey the meaning of the Greek. 'Communion' is etymologically the nearest, but in English usage it is too specialized; 'fellowship,' on the other hand has been overworked in recent years, and has been flattened and reduced in significance. Fundamentally, the meaning of the Greek term is simple. *Koinōnoi* are persons who hold property in common, partners or shareholders in a common concern, like the fishermen disciples in Luke v. 10, who (it is implied) were joint owners of the little fishing fleet. Thus *koinōnia* is properly 'partnership,' 'joint ownership,' or the like. Even where property is not concerned, the word carries this idea of partnership or sharing through a wide range of usage. Now, if the blessings of Christianity are thought of as an 'inheritance,' of which believers are 'joint-heirs' (Rom. vii. 17; Eph. iii. 6; 1 Pet. iii. 7), then the Christian may be described as a 'partner' or 'joint-shareholder' (*synkoinōnos*, Phil. i. 7; Rev. i. 9) with his fellow Christians. They hold shares together, in the Gospel (1 Cor. ix. 23), in faith (Philem. 6), in sufferings (Phil. iii. 10)

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and consolation (2 Cor. i. 7), in the distress and realm and patient endurance which Jesus brings (Rev. i. 9), in the Holy Spirit (2 Cor. xiii. 13; Phil. ii. 1), in the future glory (1 Pet. v. 1). The same 'partnership' finds expression when Christians share their money or goods with one another (Rom. xv. 26, 2 Cor. viii. 4-5, ix. 13, Phil. iv. 15; the principle is clearly laid down in Rom. xv. 27). In all these passages the original has *koinōnos* or one of its cognates or derivatives, though the translation necessarily varies. The *koinōnia* has a special embodiment in the service which Paul calls the Lord's Supper, and which among ourselves is often called the Communion *par excellence*, as being a 'sharing' of the Body and Blood of Christ under the forms of bread and wine partaken in common (1 Cor. x. 16-17). It seems likely that the fellowship or 'Communion' of Acts ii. 42 is in fact the primitive Eucharist or Holy Communion, there described as 'breaking bread and praying together,' an apt enough summary of the minimum essentials of the Liturgy.

The nature of the *koinōnia* is set forth in the New Testament under two especial figures, that of a tree and that of a human body. As the branches of a vine (John xv. 1-6), or olive tree (Rom. xi. 16-24), draw their life from the root and parent stem, and so are 'joint-shareholders in the richness of the olive,' as Rom. xi. 17 has it, so Christians share a common life drawn from Christ through His Spirit. Similarly the constitution of the Church reproduces the organic unity of a human body (1 Cor. xii; Rom. xii. 4-5). When one member suffers the others suffer with it; and as when the mouth speaks, or the ear hears, it is the whole body that speaks or hears through its members, so all the experiences and activities of the whole Church are in some sort communicated to the individual believer; and in turn the due activity of each part enables the Body to grow and build itself up (Eph. iv. 16). These metaphors make it clear that the 'partnership' of Christians is not a mere pooling of their own individual resources, whether material or spiritual; for neither tree nor body is constituted by an association of separately living parts; the life that is shared exists only as shared; and in the application of the metaphors it is made

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clear that the life of the Church is the divine life disclosed (as our author has it) in the incarnate Christ and communicated through His Spirit. Thus it matters little whether we say that we **participate in Jesus Christ our Lord** (as 1 Cor. i. 9), or that Christ is the Vine and we the branches (as John xv. 5) or that as the body is one and has many members, so also is Christ (as 1 Cor. xii. 12), or that **we form one Body in Christ** (as Rom. xii. 5), or that Christ is the Head of the Body (as Eph. i. 22, iv. 15; Col. i. 18): the implication is the same in each case. Again, the services that individual members render to the Body are not contributions out of their own resources; they are gifts bestowed upon the Body by Christ through His Spirit, and held for its benefit by the individual as a 'shareholder' (Rom. xii. 4-5; 1 Cor. xii. 4-12). According to Paul's teaching, the supreme gift of the Spirit is love or charity, by which the body is held in unity and built up (1 Cor. xii. 31-xiii. 3, Eph. iv. 16, Col. iii. 14). Since love is the characteristic activity of God—since, indeed, according to the teaching of this Epistle, **God is love**, and to remain in love is to remain in God—we are shareholders in the divine nature (2 Pet. i. 4) according as we receive and exercise the gift of charity.

The author's purpose, then, is to promote this **fellowship** in the face of disruptive tendencies. False teaching and bitter antagonisms threaten a dissolution of partnership in the common faith and a breach of the common bond of charity. To counter the menace he would recall his readers to the 'word of life,' to the Gospel, without which there is no Christianity at all. The Gospel is grounded upon most sure testimony, and it provides a searching test for all teaching offered as Christian. And the 'word of life' includes the commandment of charity (ii. 7, iii. 11), which is inseparable from the Gospel proclamation of God's redemptive act in Christ. A return to the Gospel and the Commandment will restore and confirm the threatened fellowship of the Church. Nothing else will. For the Church is not a human association (such as a club or party, which might
30 get over difficulties by a little politic give-and-take); it exists by sharing the divine life embodied in Christ: **our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ**. And that life is

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disclosed in the 'word of life,' in the Gospel which proclaims the facts of Christ's coming, and the Commandment which declares what that coming means in terms of personal relations among men.

The remoter aim of such a restoration of fellowship is stated 4 in the words that **our joy may be complete**. It cannot be doubted that there is a reference to the words of the Lord in the Fourth Gospel. In John xv. 1-10 we have the great exposition of the *koinōnia* of the Church under the figure of the Vine, leading to the definition of love as the mode of fellowship with the Father and the Son, and concluding (xv. 11), **I have told you this that my joy may be within you and your joy complete**. The words are repeated in a different but allied context in xvi. 24. With these passages in view we can hardly take verse 4 to mean simply 'It will give me great pleasure when these divisions are healed.' (That idea is expressed in different language in 2 John 4, 3 John 3.) It means that with the restoration of the threatened fellowship the Church will enter into the joy of its Lord, according to His word.

This last verse raises a question which must be discussed before we dismiss the exordium—the question, namely, of the sense in which the writer uses the pronoun 'we.' On the face of them, the opening verses taken together seem to imply a distinction between those who had direct experience of the historical facts of the Gospel, and those who knew of them only at second hand, the writer being included in the former class ('we'), and his readers in the latter ('you'). The first person plural might be the familiar epistolary use, in which 'we' means 'I' (like our editorial 'we'), or it might stand for a group to which the writer belongs, and in whose name he writes.

Elsewhere throughout the epistle he commonly uses the first person singular when he is addressing his readers in the capacity of their pastor and teacher (ii. 1, 7, 12-14, 21, 26, v. 13, 16). The first person plural, on the contrary, is very frequently used in a way which includes author and readers in one class. It is what we might call the preacher's

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'we.' This form of speech is common in homilies of all periods, and might appear no more than a matter of tact, particularly appropriate where censure has to be passed or error corrected. But it has deeper roots. It belongs to the language of the Church as a fellowship, in the sense explained above. When a preacher addresses his fellow Christians, he must indeed speak 'as the oracles of God' (1 Pet. iv. 11), but he remains one member of the body among others, sharing not only in its corporate faith and experience, but also in its liability to faults and errors which, speaking 'as the oracles of God,' he must reprobate. Similarly, the congregation, as belonging to the body of Christ, implicitly possesses the truth which the preacher communicates. He must always say in effect what our author says to his readers (ii. 21): **I am not writing to you because you do not know the truth, but because you do know it** (and consequently may be expected to recognize and assent to it when it is spoken). The first person plural therefore is an appropriate construction to use. Our author frequently employs it to mean (in effect) 'all Christians,' or 'any Christian.' The contrast to 'we' in this sense is not 'you,' but 'the world' or some equivalent expression (ii. 2, v. 19). The writer freely uses this 'we' even where he is hypothetically contemplating Christians falling into error (**If we say we have fellowship with Him when we live and move in darkness, then we are lying**), as well as when he is affirming the great common realities of Christian faith and experience (**We are children of God; We know we have crossed from death to life**).

Where 'we' and 'you' occur in the same context, it is often difficult to establish the precise difference in meaning. (There are in fact several places where some manuscripts read 'we' and others 'you,' and the true reading could not be determined from the sense of the passage alone.) In ii. 28 for example, we have an alternation of 'you' and 'we' without any apparent change of meaning. It can hardly be supposed that our author intended to say, 'Do you remain in Him so that I (or my colleagues and I) may have confidence.' The meaning of the sentence would not have been different if it had read, 'Let *us* remain in Him so that *we* may have confidence,' or 'Remain

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in Him so that *you* may have confidence.' In ii. 18-21 the first person singular, the first person plural and the second person plural all occur. In verse 21 (already quoted) we have 'I' and 'you': I do not write to you because you do not know the truth but because you do know it. The writer and his readers are clearly contrasted, yet in such terms as point to the overcoming of the contrast in a fellowship of mutual understanding, for which an inclusive 'we' is the appropriate pronoun. In 18-20 'we' and 'you' alternate: *You have learned . . . which makes us sure . . . They withdrew from us . . . You have been anointed by the holy One.* It does not seem possible that 'we' is either the epistolary plural (meaning 'I') or the true plural of the 'I' in 21 (meaning 'my colleagues and myself'). The 'anointed' Christian community is the same community from which the heretics have seceded; and when the author says that an observation of the present situation *makes us sure that it is the last hour*, it is not likely that he means either 'I am sure' or 'My colleagues and I are sure': he means that it is a Christian certainty shared by all who have the 'anointing' through which true knowledge comes (compare similar expressions in ii. 3, 5, iii. 2, 14, iv. 13, v. 18-20). In other words, the relation of 'we' and 'you' is not antithetical. If there is any distinction, 'we' is the wider and more inclusive expression, standing for the Christian community as such.

A somewhat more difficult case is iv. 4-6. The words of verse 6a, *We belong to God, he who knows God listens to us, he who does not belong to God does not listen to us*, might very naturally be understood to refer to authorized teachers of the Church among whom the writer reckons himself—but for the illegitimate implications it would seem to carry: namely, (a) that when he says *we belong to God* he means 'my colleagues and I belong to God,' and (b) that this 'we' is to be distinguished from the 'you' of verse 4: *Dear children, you belong to God.* But 'We belong to God' and 'You belong to God' cannot be distinguished in that way. We can only conclude that when the writer says, *He who knows God listens to us*, the first personal pronoun really stands for the Church as such,

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proclaiming the Gospel which becomes the touchstone to test its hearers, whether or not they belong to God and know God. That this proclamation may actually be carried out by a particular group within the Church is true, but if 'we' stands for such a special group, it does not contrast them with the laity, but identifies them with the whole Church, their words being its utterance, and as such heard by those who belong to God, and rejected by the world.

With this in view, consider the meaning of the first person plural in iv. 14: **We have seen, we do testify, that the Father has sent the Son as Saviour of the world.** Does this imply that the author (or the author and his colleagues, if the 'we' is a strict plural) stands as an actual eyewitness of the Gospel facts, over against his readers, who can only accept his testimony? If so, does that hold good also for the preceding verse? Does the author mean, 'My colleagues and I know that we are in intimate communion with God, because we (unlike you) possess the divine Spirit'? Surely not. We have here an example of a type of argument which recurs all through the epistle, in which the validity of certain propositions is tested by reference to the common Christian faith and experience. The writer here affirms the reality of a mutual indwelling of God and the believer on the ground that all true believers have a share in the divine Spirit; only, instead of 'all true believers,' he says, 'we.' This generalizing 'we' persists throughout the whole context, iv. 7-19, which contains some of the most important general propositions about the Christian life. At no point should we for a moment suspect any restriction of the scope of 'we,' except in the phrase 'we have seen.' It is difficult to accept a sudden shift of meaning so radical that whereas all through the passage 'we' has meant Christians in general, it now means a group of eyewitnesses sharply distinguished from Christians in general.

It might be suggested that the expression 'we have seen' refers here not to eyewitness, but to inward or spiritual vision, which might be predicated of any Christian who (in terms of verse 13) has a share of the divine Spirit. The author, however, has guarded against such an understanding in the

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first verse of the epistle (at which we must glance for a moment before returning to it for more detailed investigation). He is writing, he says, about what we saw with our eyes and touched with our hands. He could not have made it clearer that he is speaking of sensible experience and not of spiritual vision. But if it is not inward vision, but actual sensible experience that is in question, can the 'we' of verse 14 be given the wide reference which belongs to the pronoun in the context? Must not the pronoun, here at least, stand for a closed group of eyewitnesses?

It may be observed that the same difficulty about the first person plural arises in some passages of the Fourth Gospel. Particularly in John i. 14 we have an expression which recalls our present text: **The Logos became flesh and tarried among us; we have seen his glory**; which in turn can hardly be separated from i. 16: **We have all been receiving grace after grace from his fulness**. Does 'we' mean the apostolic witnesses or Christians in general? It may be that the solution of the problem in both writings is the same.

It is possible that the way to a solution may be found through the doctrine of the 'fellowship' of the Church which is so important to our author. The English word 'fellowship' as we have seen, is weaker than the original word *koinōnia*, which connotes a sharing of life and experience so deep and thoroughgoing that what is predicated of the whole community can in some real sense be predicated of each member, and *vice versa*. The background of this is the sense of solidarity which was so intense in ancient societies. It is a commonplace to students of the Old Testament. The 'I' of the Psalms, for example, seems to expand and contract between the individual, a group, and the entire nation. It expresses the solidarity of the Psalmist with the Israel of God. The experiences he describes are not less his own for being also those of his people, and not less corporate for being personal. And as there is solidarity among all members of God's people who are contemporary with one another, so there is solidarity among the successive generations of Israel. Thus Amos writes in the eighth century B.C.: 'Thus saith the Lord . . . I brought *you*

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up out of the land of Egypt, and led *you* forty years in the wilderness' (Amos ii. 10), although the Exodus lay at least five hundred years behind him; and Joshua, addressing the elders of Israel after the conquest of Canaan, can even be represented as saying, 'Thus saith the Lord . . . *Your eyes saw* what I did in Egypt' (Joshua xxiv. 7), although, according to the tradition, the whole generation of the Exodus died in the wilderness.

This sense of solidarity is not peculiarly 'Semitic.' Similar examples can be quoted from Greek and Latin authors. Indeed, it might be said that a faint shadow of it persists among ourselves, and sometimes colours our speech; as when an undergraduate says, 'We went head of the river in 1870'! But it needs an effort for us, born into the individualism of the modern world, to realize in imagination the strength and spontaneity of the sentiment of solidarity in ancient societies. The Old Testament usages, however, to which we have referred, are of more direct significance for our present purpose, because in Israel the natural solidarity of blood and soil was increasingly transcended by the sense of a unity based on the divine calling and covenant.

In the New Testament the conception of the *koinōnia* of the Church represents a perfect sublimation of natural solidarity, or its re-creation upon a higher level. Bearing this in mind, we may freely illustrate the language of Christian fellowship from the established forms of speech developed out of the social solidarity of antiquity, and especially from Old Testament language. It is noteworthy that both Amos and Joshua (in the passages cited above) are speaking of the 'mighty acts of the Lord' by which Israel was redeemed and became a holy people. It is of these events that both speak as if their hearers had personal experience of them. If Joshua could say, 'Your eyes saw what I did in Egypt,' to an audience who could not have been actual eyewitnesses, because he did not distinguish the experience of individuals from that of the society in which they lived and moved, so our author (referring also to the 'mighty acts of the Lord,' by which the Church was redeemed and became a holy people) may be conceived as saying, 'We have seen,' even though the 'we' might include

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many who had not been individually eyewitnesses of the Gospel facts. The Church, through its solidarity with the apostles and eyewitnesses, possesses their testimony, and therefore can bear witness before the world to the reality of the Incarnation, saying, 'We have seen'; and any member, speaking in the name of the Church, may repeat that affirmation, without necessarily making an individual claim to sensible experience of the facts. This does not preclude an alternate expansion and contraction of the 'we,' analogous to the expansion and contraction of the 'I' of the Psalms. But neither this passage nor any other of those we have examined seems to afford any solid ground for the supposition that the author is thinking in terms of a closed group of eyewitnesses (such as the Apostles) over against the general membership of the Church, or that the pronouns 'we' and 'you' distinguish this closed group from the readers of the Epistle.

In the exordium, to which we now return, the position is somewhat different. Here certainly a distinction is made (as is natural) between the author and his readers, and this distinction is expressed by 'we' and 'you' in verse 4: 'We are writing this to you,' and similarly in verse 3. 'We bring you word, so that you may share our fellowship.' Yet this 'we' of authorship is in each case at once swallowed up in a 'we' which can be no narrower in scope than the whole membership of the Church. In verse 3, 'Our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ' can hardly mean, 'My colleagues and I enjoy communion with God, which we should like you to share.' 'Our fellowship' is surely the *koinōnia* which belongs to all members of the Church as such; the fellowship which they have one with another (i. 7). And 'Our joy,' as we have seen, is the joy of the whole Church in realizing its *koinōnia* (for although in the dramatic setting of John xv. 1-11 the promise is addressed to the eleven Apostles, its intended application is as wide as that of the allegory of the Vine to which it is appended). The question is whether the 'we' of verses 1 and 2 is the 'we' of authorship, referring to the writer's own experience (which is not that of his readers), or the wider 'we' which includes the whole Church united in

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fellowship. On the one hand, this kind of language would be very natural from the Apostle John, or the Presbyter John ('the disciple of the Lord'), or some other eyewitness to whom the authorship of the epistle might be ascribed. On the other hand, it is not in itself sufficient to prove authorship by an eyewitness. We have seen that the author can say, **We have seen; we do testify**, where 'we' includes all Christians who, as such, 'remain in' Christ and 'have a share in His Spirit' (iv. 13-14); and his language here—**we saw with our eyes** (cf. Joshua's 'Your eyes saw'), **touched with our own hands**—differs only in the emphasis with which he insists that it is actual seeing, hearing and touching that he means, and not anything like inward vision. It is there that the emphasis lies, and not upon the direct knowledge of some Christians over against the second-hand knowledge of others. Even if the language is that of an eyewitness, his 'we' is like the 'I' of the Psalms, which can stand both for the individual Psalmist and for the Israel of God. He speaks not exclusively for himself or for a restricted group, but for the whole Church to which the apostolic witness belongs by virtue of its *koinōnia*, over against the world which being outside the *koinōnia* has no knowledge of the incarnate Son, and therefore no knowledge of the Real God (v. 20). He has already in mind those who break the fellowship of the Church, and who, by rejecting the evidence of eye, ear and hand to the reality of the Incarnation (iv. 2-3), range themselves with the unenlightened world (iv. 5-6).

I. WHAT IS CHRISTIANITY?

(i. 5 - ii. 28)

The general intention of this section of the Epistle is to set forth the distinctive marks of Christianity as a way of life and belief, over against current misunderstandings or misrepresentations.

First, various expressions for forms of 'religious experience' are passed in review, and subjected to searching criticism in the light of the fundamental axioms of Christianity, emphasis

I JOHN, CHAPTER I, VERSES 5-10

being laid upon the evangelical doctrine of forgiveness (i. 5-ii. 6).

Secondly, Christ's 'new commandment' of love is shown to be of the essence of the Christian religion, which is the disclosure of a new order of life, in contrast to the doomed order of a pagan world (ii. 7-17).

Thirdly, a direct attack is made upon the false doctrines which are being propagated in the Church, and the readers are recalled to the certainties of the divine revelation in the Gospel of Christ (ii. 18-28).

**I. A CRITICISM OF 'RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE,' WITH AN EXCURSUS
UPON SIN AND FORGIVENESS (i. 5-ii. 6)**

Here is the message we learned from him and announce to you: 5
'God is light and in Him there is no darkness, none.' If we 6
say, 'We have fellowship with Him,' when we live and move
in darkness, then we are lying, we are not practising the
truth; but if we live and move within the light, as He is 7
within the light, then we have fellowship with one another,
and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from every sin.
If we say, 'We are not guilty,' we are deceiving ourselves 8
and the truth is not in us; if we confess our sins, He is 9
faithful and just, He forgives our sins and cleanses us from
all iniquity; if we say, 'We have not sinned,' we make Him 10
a liar and His word is not within us. ii.

My dear children, I am writing this to you that you may not 1
sin; but if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the
Father in Jesus Christ the just; He is Himself the propitia- 2
tion for our sins, though not for ours alone but also for the
whole world.

This is how we may be sure we know Him, by obeying His 3
commands. He who says, 'I know Him,' but does not obey 4
His commands, is a liar and the truth is not in him; but 5
whoever obeys His word, in Him love to God is really
complete.

This is how we may be sure we are in Him: he who says 6
he 'remains in Him' ought to live as He lived.

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We shall find a clue to the meaning of this section of the epistle if we understand the writer to be alluding all through to certain maxims which were used as watchwords by heretical teachers. Some of them he would accept himself, but in a different sense, or with different implications. 'We are sinless'; 'we know Him'; 'we are in Him': this is the kind of language used by those who claimed superior enlightenment, and were leading the Church away from the simplicity of the Gospel. None of these maxims could be directly repudiated by one who took the 'Johannine' view of Christianity. Yet they could be so applied as to destroy the distinctive character of the faith. The writer is concerned to expose the fallacy underlying their use by the heretics.

i.

- 5 He begins with a maxim acceptable alike to himself and his opponents: God is light and in Him there is no darkness. Anyone who speaks in this way is at home in the religious world of first-century Hellenism. There is indeed something natural, and almost universal, in the symbolism of light. In primitive religion the light of the sun, apparently the source of life and well-being to the earth and all its denizens, is an object of worship. When a people has passed beyond crude nature-worship, light is still the symbol of well-being as well for the body as the soul, which is referred in thankful adoration to its source in the high God. 'The Lord is my light and my salvation,' says the Hebrew Psalmist (Ps. xxvii. 1). In Greek philosophy Plato had sanctioned the description of the ultimate reality, the Eternal Goodness (or 'Idea of the Good') in terms of light. The influence of Platonism combined with that of Zoroastrianism, with its conception of the universe as the scene of an age-long conflict between light and darkness, to provide the religious mind of the Near East with an imaginative metaphysic. A Greek writer of a period not far from that of our author gives a vision of creation. First there was boundless light; then an ocean of darkness. A holy word out of the light descended upon the darkness, and the creation of the world began. That light, he says, is Mind, or God (*Corpus Hermeticum*, I. 4-6). Philo is half a Greek and half a Hebrew when he says, referring to the

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verse of the Psalm quoted above, 'God is light, and not light only, but the archetype of every other light; or rather, more ancient and higher than any archetype' (*De Somniis*, I. 75). In the Fourth Gospel the Logos (that is to say, God as revealed in creation and in man) is equated with 'the real Light' (which is equivalent to Philo's 'archetypal Light'), and Christ as the incarnate Logos is described as the Light of the world. In fact, the teaching of this Gospel is pervaded by light-symbolism. Like Philo, however, the Evangelist stops short of the statement that the eternal God is to be defined as Light. Both these great theologians, the Jewish and the Christian, apparently felt that to go the whole length in adopting the language of current religious philosophy might endanger the conviction of the personal transcendence of God which is fundamental to Judaism and Christianity alike. Our present author is less guarded. Perhaps he was hardly aware that in summarizing the purport of Christian teaching as given in the Fourth Gospel he is giving it a turn which brings it nearer to current forms of expression, and nearer, no doubt, to the language of the heretics whom he is criticizing.

Where then does he differ from them? Not in emphasizing the truth that the being of God as light excludes any trace of darkness. They, like their compeers outside Christianity, would have affirmed that as strongly as he. It is in the corollary that he immediately draws, **If we say, 'We have fellowship with 6 Him,' when we live and move in darkness, we are lying.** That is to say, he is not interested in any metaphysical implications of the idea that God is light, but in its ethical implications. Light is for him primarily the symbol of sheer goodness; darkness, of moral evil. If then God is altogether good, without any trace of evil, it follows that we cannot have fellowship with Him without being good in our degree. It was necessary to lay stress upon this point. The age was a religious age, and many religions and philosophical systems offered communion with the divine. But religious fervour did not always go with moral seriousness. According to our authorities for the next period, there were heretical forms of Christianity which fell far below the best kind of paganism in their moral standards. Our author

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sees that danger in the kind of teaching which is making propaganda in the Church—specious propagnada, since it uses the language of an elevated mysticism. He insists on the ethical criterion. Religion is not indeed just 'morality tinged with emotion,' but, on the other hand, there is no religion in the Christian sense of the word unless it includes moral endeavour and the criticism of conduct.

- 7a To be **within the light**, then—that is to say, to be in union with God—means to lead a good life, since God is good. And this is the true basis of fellowship in the Church. It is a society of people who, believing in a God of pure goodness, accept the obligation to be good like Him (cf. Matt. v. 48). (This statement serves for the present; it must be filled out and clarified from later parts of the epistle, where it is shown that the specific character of 'light,' as a divine attribute and as a quality of human life alike, is love or charity. See pp. 34-6, 84-7.)

Down to this point, then, we have an exposition of the text, **God is light**. This maxim itself is offered as the **message we learned from Him** (that is, Christ). It is unlikely that the author supposed himself to be citing an actual saying of the Lord. We may conceive him as saying, in effect, 'The teaching of the Gospel about God may be summed up in the familiar maxim, "God is light," if you will allow to this maxim its full logical implications: that light excludes darkness, and that communion with a God who is all light without a shade of darkness must involve living a life free from the darkness of sin and radiant with the light of goodness.' For the use of the popular light-symbolism he found sufficient sanction in the Fourth Gospel, which he accepted as an authoritative exposition of the teaching of Jesus Christ. It is, however, of interest to enquire whether his doctrine is supported by the older tradition of the sayings of Jesus in the first three Gospels. The most significant passage for our purpose is the saying which both Matthew and Luke give from a tradition common to them both. In its Lucan form it reads: **Your eye is the lamp of the body: when your eye is sound, then the whole of your body has light, but if your eye is diseased, then your body is darkened.**

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(Look! perhaps your very light is dark.) So if your whole body has light, without any corner of it in darkness, it will be lit up entirely, as when a lamp lights you with its rays (Luke xi. 34-6). Here we have a picture of single-minded integrity, under the combined figures of a space flooded with light, and of a man with perfect eyesight. It is in fact a picture of one who (as our author would put it) lives and moves in the light, contrasted with one who lives and moves in darkness. This quality of integrity is the same as the purity of heart which leads to the vision of God according to Matt. v. 8 (cf. 1 John iii. 2-3), and it is a reflection in man of the 'perfectness' of God (Matt. v. 48), who alone is 'good' without qualification (Mark x. 18). Similarly, to imitate the impartial benevolence and beneficence of God towards all men is to be a son of God (Matt. v. 43-7, Luke vi. 35-6; cf. 1 John ii. 29-iii. 1). If we apply to these sayings the symbolism of Luke xi. 34-6, we shall find ourselves very close to our author's teaching that **God is light, and in Him there is no darkness; and that to have fellowship with Him means to live and move within the light.**

Here a fresh point comes up. To be **within the light, to have fellowship with Him**, is to be pure from sin (for 'what fellowship has light with darkness?': 2 Cor. vi. 14). Such purity belongs to believers, not through their own moral achievement, but by virtue of the death of Christ. Here the writer is faithfully reproducing that clause of the original apostolic Preaching which declared that **Christ died for our sins** (1 Cor. xv. 3).

It was important to guard against misunderstanding here. 8 The heretics (if we may read between the lines, with the support of what is known about 'Gnostic' teaching) take their stand upon the belief that Christians have been given a new nature superior to that of other men. Consequently, they affirm, Christians are already sinless beings; or if not all Christians, at least those who have attained to superior enlightenment. They have no further need for moral striving: they are already perfect. Indeed, some appear to have held that if the enlightened do things which in other men would

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be counted sinful, they are not sinners. Their mystical communion with God in itself removes them from the category of sinful men. Now up to a point this is so like our author's own teaching that he cannot lightly pass it by. He is quite clear that if a man has really been 'born of God' he cannot live in sin (iii. 9); and in spite of anything that may be said here, it remains true that a Christian is expected not to sin. Nevertheless, to assert roundly, **we are not guilty**, is self-deception. Our author has a plain, straightforward view of sin which is salutary in its very crudity. Just as to be righteous is, quite simply, to do what is right, so to break the moral law is to be sinful (iii. 7, 10), and an honest man must acknowledge that he has done so. There is no place for subtlety. We have sinned, and there is no use in denying it. The true teaching of the Gospel is, not that by initiation we become automatically sinless, but that within the Church we are under a dispensation which deals effectively with our sins.

- 9 The basic fact is that God is a forgiving God, as the Gospel (the 'word of life') declares Him to be. He is forgiving because He is faithful and just. That God is 'faithful,' or trustworthy, is a fundamental postulate of biblical religion in Old and New Testaments (cf. Deut. vii. 9; Ps. xxxvi. 5, lxxxix. *passim*, etc.; 1 Cor. i. 9, x. 13; 1 Thess. v. 24; 2 Thess. iii. 3; 1 Pet. iv. 19); that is to say, unlike the fickle gods of pagan mythology, He is so entirely consistent with Himself that we can rely upon Him completely in all circumstances and through all vicissitudes. It is because God is faithful, or trustworthy, that He can be the Object of faith or trust. God is also just, or righteous: without this conviction there is no ethical religion. But it is remarkable that our author should base divine forgiveness directly upon the faithfulness and justice of God. Christian teaching has often opposed the justice of God, which demands that sin shall be punished, to His mercy, which remits the punishment; and some theories of the Atonement set out to explain how this opposition is overcome. The opposition is not recognized in the New Testament. For 'John' as for Paul (see Rom. iii. 21-6 and notes in Moffatt Commentary) the mercy or forgiveness of God is a function of His righteousness; and so

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far from forgiveness being a kind of breach in His self-consistency, it is both possible and actual only because God is completely 'faithful,' completely to be relied upon in all circumstances; or, as it is put in 2 Tim. ii. 13 (with reference to Christ), if we are faithless, He remains faithful—for He cannot be untrue to Himself. God's attitude to us, His purpose for us, do not alter because we sin against Him. When we turn to Him again, we find Him still the same. If we confess our sins, and in confession repudiate them, then God forgives, not (as a man might) because He chooses on this occasion to be indulgent, or considerate, or tolerant, but because no other course would be consistent with the perfectly good will by which the whole universe is created and sustained. It is this, and this only, in the last resort, that justifies our confidence of being forgiven our repeated offences against the law of God. We believe in the forgiveness of sin, not by convincing ourselves that our sins were excusable, or remediable, or that we meant well, or that 'we won't do it again.' It is because the principle of forgiveness is built into the structure of a moral order created and determined by the character of a just and faithful God.

In view of all this, the claim to be sinless is not only self-deception (as in verse 8); it is a presumptuous denial of the truth of the Gospel; for in proclaiming God to be a faithful, just and forgiving God, it declares man to be a sinful creature needing forgiveness. If on the ground of any ideas of our own we deny this, then his word is not within us: we have heard the Gospel, and thought we believed it; but we have not inwardly digested it. The probability is that an effective appreciation of our own sinful condition is in most cases not (as is often supposed) a preliminary to the hearing of the Gospel, but a consequence of it. ii.

The general position having been thus laid down, we are to have two outstanding evidences or instances of the way in which, according to the Gospel, sin is effectively dealt with. But before speaking of them the writer once more enters a *caveat*: nothing he is about to say must be understood as conferring any license to sin. That is in any case excluded (compare the

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similar misunderstanding mentioned in Rom. vi. 1 and confuted in the verses following).

First, then, Christ not only died for our sins (as verse 7 above); He also lives to intercede for us. This also is part of the Gospel (cf. Rom. viii. 34; Heb. vii. 25, ix. 24), which contemplates us always as sinners standing before God's judgment seat, and needing the mediation of an **advocate**.

The word so translated is *parakletos*, familiarly Englished as 'paraclete.' Its etymological meaning is 'one called in' to help, and so in the most general sense it means 'helper,' 'supporter' (cf. Moffatt's translation in John xiv. 16, etc.). But it was popularly used to denote a friend 'called in' to support a party to a law-suit or the defendant in a criminal trial, an 'advocate.' It is interesting to observe that in the early Rabbinic tractate *Pirke Aboth* (iv. 13) the Greek word, transliterated into Hebrew, is used in speaking of man as a defendant before the heavenly tribunal. 'He who fulfils one commandment has gained for himself one "paraclete"; he who commits one transgression has gained for himself one accuser.' Here it is a question of balancing merit against demerit: a man's own merits are his 'advocates' to win God's favour. The New Testament repudiates this idea. We cannot acquire merit before God. We need an 'advocate' who is other than ourselves.

The same word 'paraclete' is used by Philo where he is describing the nature of true worship, as symbolized by the liturgy of the Temple. The High Priest's vestments, he says, are emblems of the created universe in its perfection as manifesting the divine Logos. 'It was necessary for him who performs the office of priest to the Father of the universe to employ as advocate His Son, most perfect in virtue, for the amnesty of sins and the supply of unstinted blessings' (*Vita Mosis*, II. 134). It may have been language of this kind that led to the choice of the term 'paraclete' for Christ as Intercessor in 'Johannine' circles. But the belief in His heavenly intercession is no innovation (see Moffatt Commentary, *Romans*, p. 144).

The belief responds to a need deeply felt wherever religion is seriously ethical. When once the conscience of man comes to recognize a moral law conceived as the will of an entirely

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righteous God, then every advance in our apprehension of the character of God and of His demands upon man deepens the sense of guilt which sets a barrier between God and ourselves. Yet our need to approach God is all the greater because of our sin. How if there be within the divine Being Itself that which sympathizes with us and pleads our cause? The Christian Gospel declares that this is so; and not only so, but that this Everlasting Mercy was incarnate for us in Christ, who as Man had personal acquaintance with our moral conflict, and now represents us within the eternal Godhead (Heb. iv. 14-16). If we conceive to ourselves Christ as praying for us (as He prayed for His disciples on earth), then our prayers for forgiveness and release from sin, whether for ourselves or for others (v. 16), are taken up into His intercession, which is not, as all our prayers are, weakened or hindered by sin (for He is Jesus Christ the *just*, or righteous, as our author emphatically adds). This is what is meant by praying 'in the name of Jesus Christ.' Whatever our words, or even our thoughts, may be when we pray (and they are inevitably imperfect at best, and often mistaken), the real content of Christian prayer is that which Christ asks on our behalf, and the Father grants. To this Paul adds (Rom. viii. 26) that the Spirit (who for him is scarcely distinguishable from Christ indwelling) 'intercedes' within us, when we do not know what prayer rightly to offer, and can only utter an inarticulate sigh. This conception of the Spirit as Advocate, supplementing, as it were, the work of Christ as Advocate, is not present in this epistle, but the Fourth Gospel knows the Spirit as '*another Paraclete*' (John xiv. 16).

Secondly, the heavenly Advocate is also **Himself the propitiation for our sins**. The word **propitiation**, however, is a doubtful rendering. The word in the original (*hilasmos*), which occurs also in iv. 10, is derived from a verb which in pagan Greek usage generally means to 'placate,' 'pacify' or 'propitiate' an offended person, and in particular an offended deity. The verb, however, has another meaning, rarer in pagan writers—namely, to perform an act by which defilement (ritual or moral) is removed; to 'expiate.' The sense that evil doing brings with it a kind of taint is natural and general. It is

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related to that 'numinous' feeling in the presence of a *mysterium tremendum* in which some see the most primitive element in religion. When the object of the 'numinous' feeling comes to be identified with the moral Absolute, or with a God who is 'of purer eyes than to behold iniquity,' the sense of defilement attaches itself more and more definitely to moral evil. In antiquity it was universally believed that the performance of prescribed rituals (which might or might not include the ritual slaughter of animals) had the value, so to speak, of a powerful disinfectant. The ritual duly performed, one could be confident that the taint was removed. For such rituals the most general term in the Greek Old Testament is the verb in question, which almost invariably bears the sense 'to cleanse from defilement,' 'to expiate.' Where priests or other men are the subject, it refers to sacrifices or lustral rites. But in Hebrew thought it is possible, as it never is in Greek paganism, for the subject of the action to be God; and then the meaning is virtually indistinguishable from 'to forgive': the defilement of sin can be removed, in the last resort, only by divine forgiveness (see Moffatt Commentary, *Romans*, pp. 54-5).

Biblical usage is not necessarily decisive for a writer who makes so few allusions to the Old Testament as our present author; and in the immediate context it might seem possible that the sense of 'propitiation' is in place: if our guilt requires an advocate before God, we might, logically, need to placate His righteous anger. But the wider context denies this interpretation. Our forgiveness rests upon the justice and faithfulness of God, not upon the possibility of averting His anger. He *forgives* our sins; He *cleanses* us from all iniquity: those two verbs express precisely the ideas principally associated with words of this family throughout the Greek Old Testament (and probably also in the few cases where they occur in the New Testament, Rom. iii. 25; Luke xviii. 13; Heb. ii. 17, and in a transferred application, Heb. ix. 5).

The reference in i. 7 to the blood of Christ suggests that the author is thinking in the first place of the death of Christ as analogous to animal sacrifices (much in the same way, perhaps, as is set forth in the Epistle to the Hebrews; see Heb. ix.-x.). The

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term used, however, does not in itself connote a blood-sacrifice, and the expression in ii. 2 is wide enough to cover the whole work of Christ—His death especially, no doubt, but not to the exclusion of His incarnation, His earthly ministry, and His resurrection and ascension. The entire work of Christ is an act of expiation; and God is the Author of it. It is He who sent His Son to be the expiation for our sins (iv. 10)—that is to say, as the efficacious means by which **He forgives our sins and cleanses us from all iniquity**. The originating cause of the whole action is the justice and faithfulness of God, or (as in iv. 10) the love of God. Further, this act of God affects the whole human race. Christ is the expiation for our sins, and **not for ours alone, but also for the whole world**. 'The world' is in this epistle as a rule an expression for the hostile pagan order in which human life is organized in opposition to the will of God (ii. 15-17; see notes there), and as such a realm of evil and an enemy to be overcome (v. 19, 4-5). But the author does not forget that the human beings who are thus involved in a godless order remain the objects of God's care and interest; and that the Gospel affirms that **He loved the world** (in this sense) so dearly that **He gave up His only Son** (John iii. 16). This saying is echoed in iv. 9, and its universal intention is succinctly brought out in iv. 14: **The Father has sent the Son as the Saviour of the world**.

Such is the doctrine of Christ's expiation as we gather it from this epistle. We are not told precisely how the work of Christ has this effect. Christian theology has notoriously always been in some uncertainty upon this point. But an attentive study of the Gospels will suggest that the doctrine is by no means an unsupported speculation. Jesus Christ acted within a situation representative of human history at large. He became involved in desperate conflict with sinful elements in the situation. In the conflict He acted in such a way as to mirror perfectly the attitude to men which He attributed to the Father in heaven: uncompromising towards all evil; unweariedly benevolent towards those who wrought the evil. He was finally left utterly alone, and suffered the extremity of all that

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human wickedness could inflict. On a particular day in history, therefore, there stood on the one side a world of men with the stain of an indelible crime upon its conscience—a stain of which none of those involved in the situation were free, not Peter nor the sons of Zebedee—and on the other side stood a Person upon whom all this concentrated wickedness had no other effect than to give Him the occasion for suffering to the end in undiminished loyalty to God and goodwill towards men. At the moment when Christ seemed defeated, and all that He stood for appeared powerless in face of the sin of the world, the power of almighty God was made manifest in bringing Him back from the dead. His return to His faithless disciples was a clear act of forgiveness; and the first message they bore from Him to the world contained the offer of forgiveness for its sins (Acts ii. 38-9). The Church made its entry into history in the newborn conviction that by what Christ had done and suffered the sin that had brought Him down was, so to speak, neutralized, and its corruption sterilized, by the love and power of God. In some such way we might briefly summarize the story. It is at least sufficient to show that our author, while using the language of pre-Christian religious observance, is not deserting his canon of historical actuality (**what we heard, what we saw with our eyes, what we witnessed and touched with our own hands**) when he says that in Christ the love of God provided an expiation for sin. For it is true that the historical episode in question, while it displays in a marked degree the corruption of our nature by sin, issues in a signal exhibition of divine forgiveness, determined entirely by what Christ was, did and suffered.

Our generation, confronted with the 'mystery of iniquity' upon so vast a scale, is perhaps more ready than our immediate predecessors to receive with some understanding the doctrine of Christ's expiation. Wicked things have been done, and are being done, which shame us all and defile our common humanity. We grope about for means of redress; but we know that whatever we may do or resolve, the shame and defilement remain, and no one of our generation can ever be clear in his own conscience. The Gospel 'speaks to our condition' when it

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assures us, not only that God loves the world and is ready to forgive our sin, but that His love has been expressed concretely and objectively in history to provide a means of sterilizing human wickedness and effecting a forgiveness which is not merely an amnesty or indulgence, but a radical removal of the taint. We may not be able to give a fully reasoned theology of the matter, but we are entitled to believe, in face of the degradation of our common humanity, that God has done in Christ all that needs to be done to cleanse us, and done it with the complete adequacy possible only to infinite power and love.

We now pass on to another point in which the author conceives the teaching of the heretics to misrepresent the authentic Christian Gospel—namely, their claim to ‘knowledge’ of God. We are here in touch with the central idea of that movement which is often called ‘Gnosticism’ because of its emphasis upon *gnosis*, knowledge. It goes back, on the one hand, to the intellectualism of the Greeks. In the classical period an almost unbounded confidence in the human reason led thinkers to believe that accurate knowledge of reality was attainable, and that in such knowledge lay the ideal for human life. Plato insisted that knowledge in the true sense, as opposed to mere ‘opinion,’ must be knowledge of the eternal and unchangeable essence of things, and not of variable phenomena. In his doctrine of eternal ‘forms’ or ‘ideas,’ resident in heaven and contemplated by pure reason, there is already an element which may fairly be called mystical, especially when the knowledge of the ideas is represented as the soul’s ‘recollection’ of what it had known in a higher existence. In the Hellenistic period the self-confidence of the Greek spirit faltered. Doubtful of the competence of the unaided intellect to attain the highest knowledge, philosophers turned to religion, which in the ‘mysteries’ offered a revelation or vision of God. Spiritualizing this conception (for the mysteries before they were reinterpreted by philosophers were crude enough), they arrived at a conception of a ‘knowledge’ of God not attained by rational thought, but given in an

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ineffable experience. One writer says, 'Not yet are we able to open the eyes of the mind and to behold the beauty, the imperishable, inconceivable beauty, of the Good. For you will see it when you cannot say anything about it. For the knowledge of it is divine silence and annihilation of all senses. . . . Irradiating the whole mind, it shines upon the soul and draws it up from the body, and changes it all into divine essence' (*Corp. Herm.*, X. 5-6). The attainment of such knowledge became the ideal of the religious life. 'This alone is salvation for a man—knowledge of God' (*ib.*, 15). He who in this sense knows God is a 'perfect man'; he is immortal like the gods; indeed, he has himself become a god. Such ideas were widely diffused in the Hellenistic world.

In the Hebrew Scriptures also 'knowledge of God' is the goal of human aspiration. 'Let him that glorieth,' says Jeremiah, 'glory in this, that he understandeth and knoweth Me, that I am the Lord' (Jer. ix. 24). The same prophet foretells a day when 'they shall all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them, saith the Lord' (xxxix. 34). For the Hebrew, however, to know God is neither (primarily) an intellectual exercise nor an ineffable mystical experience. It means rather to acknowledge God in His ways with man, to recognize His claims upon man, to understand His Law with the intention of obeying it. Nevertheless, when the Old Testament was translated into Greek, the expression 'to know God' inevitably suggested to a new circle of readers the idea of a mystical apprehension of pure reality with which they were familiar. Philo, with a foot in each camp, often uses language which is similar to that of his Greek contemporaries. 'The supreme end,' he says, is 'knowledge of Him who truly is, who is the first and most perfect Good, from whom as from a fountain all partial goods are poured upon the world and those in it' (*De Decal.*, 81).

The Fourth Evangelist boldly adopts such language: 'This is eternal life—to know Thee, the only real God' (John xvii. 3). There was sanction for it in the saying attributed to Jesus in the tradition lying behind the First and Third Gospels (Matt. xi. 27, Luke x. 22), in which, claiming a Son's knowledge of the Father, He offers to reveal Him to men. The meaning

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is here closer to the biblical tradition than to Hellenistic ideas. In the Fourth Gospel itself it is made perfectly plain that to know God is to experience His love in Christ, and to return that love in obedience (see John xiv. 15-24, etc.). Some, however, who claimed the Christian name went right over to extreme forms of 'Gnosticism.' 'The Gospel,' said the Gnostic Basilides, 'is knowledge of the supra-mundane.' He and other heretical teachers of the second century dissolved Christian belief into various theosophical systems which, though they sometimes command admiration for the subtlety of their speculative thought, have little obvious connection with ethical religion.

The teachers whom our author has in view would appear, as we have seen, to have been precursors of the second-century Gnostics. They claimed to be enlightened, but they did not take seriously the ethical demands which true religion makes upon men. 'I know Him,' they said. Whether the word 'Him' here refers to God or to Christ is uncertain, as elsewhere in the Epistle. In the Fourth Gospel God is known in and through Christ, and the present writer hardly distinguishes. If we have in mind i. 8, we should naturally take 'I know Him' as a statement parallel to 'We have fellowship with Him,' and the reference would be to God. If we look to the immediate context, we should take it to refer to Christ. It makes little difference. In any case, it is the familiar idea of 'knowledge of God' that is in view. It is easy to say, 'I know Him,' but how can we³⁴ be sure that we know Him? The answer is, by obeying His commands. In such obedience love to God is expressed, and it^{5a} is only in such ethical love that God is 'known' in any sense that matters for religion.

It is clear that the highly elliptical statement we have here presupposes the fuller exposition of the theme in the Fourth Gospel—presupposes it, probably, as an authority acknowledged both by the writer and by his opponents. They, like him, believe, on the authority of the Fourth Gospel, that eternal life lies in the knowledge of God, but they overlook the explicit teaching of that Gospel about the true nature of such knowledge.

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^{5b-}₆ There is another way of formulating the relation of man to God which constitutes eternal life: it may be spoken of as 'knowing' God, or it may be spoken of as 'remaining in' God. The latter formula is characteristic of the Fourth Gospel. It is not found (verbally) in the sources which are our authorities for Hellenistic mysticism, but analogous expressions are found, and the general idea, which is that of 'mystical union,' is wide-
5b spread. Again our author asks, how can we be sure we are in
6 Him? In this case the word 'Him' must stand for Christ; for the answer is, **He who says he 'remains in Him' ought to live as He lived.** The test for the reality of the experience of union with God in Christ is the imitation of Christ. We must take it that the heretics are not talking idly when they say, 'I know Him; I remain in Him.' They are affirming their own 'religious experience.' Only, the absence of ethical seriousness in their lives throws doubt upon the validity of the experience.

In this passage our author is not only rebutting dangerous tendencies in the Church of his time, but discussing a problem of perennial importance, that of the validity of religious experience. We may have the feeling of awareness of God, of union with Him, but how shall we know that such experience corresponds to reality? It is clear that no amount of clearness or strength in the experience itself can guarantee its validity, any more than the extreme vividness of a dream leads us to suppose that it is anything but a dream. If, however, we accept the revelation of God in Christ, then we must believe that any experience of God which is valid has an ethical quality defined by what we know of Christ. It will carry with it a renewed fidelity to His teaching and example. The writer does not mean that only those who perfectly obey Christ and follow His example can be said to have experience of God. That would be to affirm the sinlessness of Christians in a sense which he has repudiated. But unless the experience includes a setting of the affections and will in the direction of the moral principles of the Gospel, it is no true experience of God, in any Christian sense. That is, of course, not all that is to be said. There will be more to be said in the Epistle itself; but so far as

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it goes, this criterion of the validity of religious experience holds good.

Here ends the first section, dealing with questionable claims to exalted 'religious experience,' and with the tests by which their validity must be judged. It moves largely in the sphere of anti-Gnostic polemic, and, as we have seen, it has many allusions to 'Gnostic' ideas and forms of speech. Embedded in it, however, is a passage (i. 8 – ii. 2) which recalls the fundamental teaching of the Gospel about sin and forgiveness, and does so in the native speech of primitive Christianity, formed out of its Jewish heritage, without any 'Gnostic' colouring. This is significant.

2. THE NEW DISPENSATION (ii. 7-17)

This section falls into three well-marked divisions: (a) In 7-11 the difference between the world of 'light' and the world of 'darkness' is correlated with the passage from the old order to the new, which, according to the apostolic Preaching, took place with the coming of Christ; and the new order is shown to be characterized by Christ's 'new commandment' of love, or charity.

(b) Then, in an almost lyrical strain, the writer celebrates the blessings of the new dispensation—forgiveness, knowledge of God, and victory over evil powers (ii. 12-14).

(c) Finally, he emphasizes the irreconcilable opposition between the Christian, who belongs to the new dispensation, and the pagan world, which belongs to the old order, doomed to destruction (ii. 15-17).

What is particularly noteworthy here is the power with which the primitive Gospel of 'realized eschatology' reasserts itself in a Hellenistic environment, finding new forms of expression, but conserving the authentic note of the apostolic Preaching.

(a) THE NEW COMMANDMENT (ii. 7-11)

Beloved, I am not writing you any new command, but an old 7
command which you have had from the very beginning:
the old command is the word you have heard. And yet it is 8

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- a new command that I am writing to you—realized in Him and also in yourselves, because the darkness is passing away
- 9 and the true light is already shining. He who says he is 'in
10 the light' and hates his brother, is in darkness still. He who
loves his brother remains in the light—and in the light
11 there is no pitfall; but he who hates his brother is in darkness, he walks in darkness and does not know where he is going, for the darkness has blinded his eyes.

The writer has spoken of the divine commands, or word, in obeying which love to God is complete. He is now to make explicit what the command of Christ is. He has in mind that passage of the Fourth Gospel, where Christ says, I give you a new command, to love one another—as I have loved you, you are to love one another (John xiii. 34). That this 'command' is intimately related to the union with God which is eternal life is made clear in another passage: If you keep my commands, you will remain within my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands, and remain within His love. . . . This is my command: you are to love one another as I have loved you (John xv. 10-12).

- 7 This well-known precept of Christ is not, he says, a new command, in the sense that it is something added to the original Gospel. It is an old command which you have had from the very beginning; it is the word you have heard, that is to
8 say, a part of the Gospel itself. In what sense then is it called in the Fourth Gospel a new command? In the sense in which 'all things are made new' in Christianity. For to be a Christian is to be living in a new creation, as Paul had said (2 Cor. v. 17). The writer is echoing a thought which runs all through the New Testament when he says, The darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining. It is the universal assumption of all New Testament writers that with the coming of Christ a new age has dawned: night is yielding to day, darkness to light; Christians are sons of the Light and sons of the day (1 Thess. v. 4-8; cf. Eph. v. 8-14). Originally this idea was set within the time-scheme of Jewish eschatology, with its doctrine of the two ages, 'this age' and 'the age to come.' It

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was translated, partially in Paul, more thoroughly in the Epistle to the Hebrews and the Fourth Gospel, into terms of the two orders or planes of reality recognized by contemporary philosophical thought (chiefly Platonic)—the eternal order and the temporal or phenomenal order. The frequent use of light (from Plato onwards) as a symbol for the eternal order helped the transition. To say, then, that Christians are in the light carries with it, for those who are aware of the primary purport of the Gospel, the idea that through the work of Christ they have passed into a new order of life, as He died to this world and rose again. Provided that one did not lose sight of the whole rich content of this idea in its evangelical setting, the language and categories of a philosophical mysticism could be safely and profitably used to interpret it to the wider world. But it was easy for converts from the higher paganism to miss the distinctively evangelical note, and this, our author believes is what the heretics have done. For them, to be in the light, 9 means no more than to be 'enlightened,' or to be initiated into 'knowledge of the supra-mundane.' They must be reminded that to be in the light, as Christians understand it, is to be within that 'newness of life' which Christ has brought to the world; and an aspect of that 'newness' is the new command of love or charity. It is an aspect realized in Him, because He 8 lived in the love of the Father and laid down His life in love for men (cf. John x. 14-18, xv. 12-13); and realized also in yourselves, because you are within the new order in which the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining—or are you within it? He who says he is 'in the light' 9 and hates his brother, is in darkness still, while he who loves his 10 brother remains in the light. So there is a clear criterion. To obey the command of Christ, to follow His example, and in particular to obey and follow Him in the way of love, this is to be sure we know Him, to be sure we are in Him, and to be in the light.

As for the heretics, they have missed the way, for all their 11 claims to superior 'religious experience.' Why have they done so? In the opinion of the writer it is not a simple case of intellectual error; it is a fundamentally false attitude to life, shown

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in their lack of charity. The implication is that their contentiousness, their arrogance and contempt for the 'unenlightened,' on the one hand, and on the other their neglect of the practical obligations of Christian fellowship (see iii. 17), amount to a flat denial of the principle of charity. Anyone who denies that principle, who hates instead of loving his 'brothers,' is so alienated from the true life of man that he cannot think straight: **he walks in darkness and does not know where he is going** (cf. John xi. 9-10, xii. 35).

(b) BLESSINGS OF THE NEW DISPENSATION (ii. 12-14)

- 12 Dear children, I am writing to you,
 because your sins are forgiven for His sake:
13 fathers, I am writing to you,
 because you know Him who is from the very beginning:
 young men, I am writing to you,
 because you have conquered the evil One.
 Children, I have written to you,
 because you know the Father:
14 fathers, I have written to you,
 because you know Him who is from the very beginning:
 young men, I have written to you,
 because you are strong, and the word of God remains
 within you, and you have conquered the evil One.

The writer now turns from the argument by which he has been confuting false interpretations of the Christian religion, to a direct pastoral appeal to his readers. In a series of aphorisms he reminds them of what it means to live in an age when the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining. What are the characteristic notes of the new age as affirmed by prophecy and by the Gospel? They are, above all else, forgiveness of sins, knowledge of God, and victory over the powers of evil. Thus Isaiah (xi. 1-9) forecasts the reign of a Messiah, upon whom rests the spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord, and who will be victorious over 'the wicked.' Under His reign, 'the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea.' Similarly, the Second

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Isaiah (lii. 3-6) proclaims the redemption of the people of God from the worldly powers which oppress them, and continues, 'Therefore My people shall know My name: therefore they shall know in that day that I am He that doth speak: behold, it is I.' Jeremiah (xxxi. 31-4) sums up the terms of the 'new covenant' in the words, 'They shall all know Me, from the least of them unto the greatest of them, saith the Lord: for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin will I remember no more.' This passage is echoed in various places in the New Testament, and is quoted at length in Heb. viii. 8-12 as, so to speak, the programme of the Christian dispensation. Already in the primitive apostolic Preaching as represented in Act ii. the proclamation that Christ is 'at the right hand of God,' and this His enemies are under His feet (i.e. that He is victor over the powers of evil), leads up to the offer of forgiveness of sins in His name. In Rom. viii. 31-9 Paul plays eloquently upon the same association of ideas. We are justified through Christ, who is 'at the right hand of God' and therefore we are 'more than conquerors.' Again, in the closely argued passage 1 Cor. i. 18 - ii. 16, Christ is to us both wisdom and power. In Him the Church has been chosen to overcome 'the strong things' of the world, and in Him we have both justification and knowledge of 'the things of God.' Above all, in the Fourth Gospel (which for our author is the most authoritative exposition of Christianity), Christ both 'takes away the sin of the world,' and reveals the knowledge of God, and by His death 'the prince of this world' is 'cast out' (John i. 29, xii. 31).

Our author therefore is echoing the central tradition of the Gospel when he addresses his readers as members of the people of the new covenant, whose sins are forgiven, who know the Eternal, and who have overcome the world.

His appeal is couched in a rhetorical, almost poetical, form, consisting of two sequences of three aphorisms, with a strongly marked rhythm and parallelism (not, however, the distinctively Hebraic kind of parallelism familiar to us from the Old Testament). The three aphorisms in each sequence are addressed respectively to **children**, **fathers**, and **young men**. (The word for 'children' in verse 12 is *teknia*, in verse 13,

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paidia; but at this stage of the language there was little difference in meaning.) The question is whether or not the author designs each statement specifically for one of three 'age-groups' in the Church. It is not impossible to recognize a certain appropriateness to a particular age-group in some of the privileges mentioned. Thus it is natural enough that young men should be congratulated because they are strong. It is not unnatural to congratulate men of the elder generation because they know Him who is from the very beginning—the 'Ancient of Days.' To say of children that they know their Father has at least a certain sentimental aptness, and perhaps more, since there is a saying of Jesus in which the revelation of the Father is reserved for 'babes' (Matt. xi. 25; Luke x. 21). On the other hand, there is in fact no difference between the assurance to children that they know the Father, and the assurance to fathers that they know Him who is from the very beginning. And surely it is not only to young men that the Gospel assures victory over evil, or to children, the forgiveness of sins. Moreover, the fact that elsewhere in the Epistle the author frequently addresses his readers in general as 'children' (*teknia*, ii. 1, 28, iii. 18, iv. 4, v. 21; *paidia*, ii. 18; and one or the other, iii. 7, the MSS. differing), makes it difficult to suppose that in this passage alone he seriously intends to confine the term to one class among them. The threefold arrangement is probably not much more than a rhetorical figure. All the privileges mentioned belong to all Christians, but emphasis and variety of expression are secured by distributing them into groups. Christians have the innocence of childhood—not a natural innocence, but that conferred by the forgiveness of sins—as it is written, 'Of such is the Kingdom of God.' They know God as a child knows his father, in accordance with the word of Christ. They have the strength of youth—again not merely natural strength, but the power of Christ's victory over evil, which makes us 'more than conquerors through Him that loved us.' They have that serene sense of the abiding and eternal which is naturally the fruit of age and experience, but is given to Christians, young or old, by their faith. That is to say, all Christians are (by grace, not nature) children in inno-

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cence and dependence on the heavenly Father, young men in strength, and fathers in experience. It is perhaps worth observing that in non-Christian religious writers of the period we meet with the thought that the true mystic, who has risen above the limitations of time and space into communion with the eternal, has experience of all grades and stages of existence at once. 'To be everywhere at once—in earth, in sea, in heaven; to be unborn, in the womb, young, old, dead, after death'—this is to be fit for the knowledge of God (*Corpus Hermeticum*, XI. 20; somewhat similarly, *ib.*, XIII. 11). In view of our author's manifest sympathy with some aspects of 'Hellenistic mysticism,' it is in character that he should think of the Christian life as combining the characteristic experiences of childhood, youth and age.

(c) THE CHRISTIAN AND THE OLD WORLD

Love not the world, nor yet what is in the world; if anyone loves 15
the world, love for the Father is not in him. For all that is 16
in the world, the desire of the flesh and the desire of the eyes
and the proud glory of life, belongs not to the Father but to
the world; and the world is passing away with its desire, 17
while he who does the will of God remains for ever.

From assurance the writer passes to exhortation. The connection of thought is clear when we bear in mind that the forgiveness, knowledge and victory of which he has spoken are the notes of the new order of life inaugurated by Christ. The old order is here called **the world**, the term being used not for the created universe, nor for the human race as such (for in this sense, as we have seen, Christ is the Saviour of **the world**, iv. 14, and His death is an expiation for the sins of the **whole world**, ii. 2), but for the life of human society as organized under the power of evil, as it is described in v. 19: **the whole world lies in the power of the evil One**.

It was a part of the eschatological belief which Christianity inherited from Judaism that while God is the creator and ruler of all mankind, He has for reasons best known to Himself permitted to the powers of evil a limited and temporary rule

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over His world. This rule will be brought to an end when 'His Kingdom will appear throughout all His creation' (*Assumption of Moses*, x. 1). This view, which is first clearly and explicitly enunciated in post-exilic apocalypse, may perhaps have been influenced by the dualism of much religious thought in the pagan world, especially of the ethically elevated faith of Zoroaster, with which the Jews were brought into contact from the days when they formed part of the Persian Empire. According to this faith, the world is the scene of perpetual conflict between the power of light, Ahura-Mazda, and the power of darkness, Angro-Mainyu. Its message to the world was a bracing call to stand on the side of Ahura-Mazda. Zoroastrianism exercised a far-reaching influence upon the religious thought of the Hellenistic world, strengthening tendencies to dualism already present from other sources. Much of this thought has an ascetic bias against the world of matter and sense. That apocalyptic Judaism was wholly unaffected by this tendency cannot be affirmed, and Christian thought was always in danger of falling under it. But Judaism never really succumbed to dualism. It was not for nothing that at the beginning of the Persian period the Second Isaiah had formulated Jewish monotheism in absolute terms over against the dualism of Persia (see Isa. xlv. 5-7). The Jews never doubted that 'the Most High ruleth in the kingdom of men' (Dan. iv. 32). Even the temporary sway of the powers of evil falls somehow within the purpose of God, and the whole meaning of that purpose will be revealed and fulfilled when His Kingdom shall appear. In the 'present age' the sovereignty of God is real but veiled; in the 'age to come' it will be manifest. Nor is the created world of matter irredeemably evil, though it was, according to an interpretation of Gen. iii. 17, 'cursed' for Adam's sake; for in the 'age to come' the whole creation will be transfigured (cf. Rom. viii. 21).

The Christian Gospel, first formulated in terms of eschatology, affirmed that with the coming of Christ the Kingdom of God was revealed, and the Age to Come inaugurated. But this did not bring with it (according to eschatological expectation) the end of history. While Christ had undoubtedly over-

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come the 'rulers of this age' (1 Cor. ii. 6), or the 'prince of this world' (John xii. 31), the full effect of His victory was to be observed only within the new Israel created by His redemptive work—that is, in the experience of the Church. Outside this sphere the old order appeared to survive intact. This presented a problem with which Christian thought is wrestling all through the New Testament. Our present author is not concerned with the theological or philosophical aspects of the problem. He takes a realistic view of the actual situation. Within the Church, the experience of forgiveness, victory and knowledge of God establishes the reality and finality of Christ's redemption. That this redemption is designed for the **whole world** is a matter of faith. But the author observes in the pagan world in which he lives the marks of that domination of evil powers which Christ lived and died to destroy. Thus he sees the Christian life as one which demands a clear choice between God and the 'world'; that is, in practical terms, the Christian must not compromise with the principles and ways of pagan society.

The **world** then, for this writer, is no merely theoretical conception, but simply the pagan society in which he and his readers necessarily moved, and which in various ways exercised pressure upon them. It would appear that in his time, and in his neighbourhood, this pressure was not exerted by persecution. Christianity was indeed unpopular (iii. 13); but of actual persecution we hear nothing in these epistles. (Contrast the position revealed in the Revelation of John). But when persecution was relaxed, the temptation was all the greater to conform as far as possible to the practices and customs of pagan neighbours. It is against this conformity that the writer is concerned to warn his readers. In a few telling phrases he 16 characterizes what seem to him the essential marks of the pagan way of life. There is **the desire of the flesh**—that is to say, the sensuality which, not on Christian testimony alone, was deeply rooted and widespread in Graeco-Roman society. There is **the desire of the eyes**, by which we may understand the tendency to be captivated by the outward show of things, without enquiring into their real values. There is **the proud**

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glory of life. The word translated proud glory is one used by Greek moralists from Aristotle onwards—*alazoneia*. The *alazōn* is a conceited, pretentious humbug. He is thus described in the *Characters* of Theophrastus:

'The *Alazōn* is the kind of person who will stand on the mole and tell perfect strangers what a lot of money he has at sea, and discourse of his investments, how large they are, and what gains and losses he has made, and as he spins his yarns he will send his boy to the bank—his balance being a shilling. If he enjoys company on the road, he is apt to tell how he served with Alexander the Great, how he got on with him, and how many jewelled cups he brought home; and to discuss the Asiatic craftsmen, how much better they are than any in Europe—never having been away from Athens. He will say that he was granted a free permit for the export of timber, but took no advantage of it, to avoid ill-natured gossip; and that during the corn-shortage he spent more than fifteen hundred pounds in gifts to needy citizens. He will be living in a rented house, and will tell anyone who does not know the facts that this is the family residence, but he is going to sell it because it is too small for his entertainments' (*Characters*, No. 23; my translation, abridged).

The vulgar 'climber' of this light-hearted but pungent caricature came to the front in the irresponsible, acquisitive, individualistic society of the Hellenistic world. Our author, looking upon contemporary society from a Christian standpoint, and judging it with a deeper seriousness, sees it as the very incarnation of this pretentious, self-glorifying spirit.

By the world, then, we are to understand pagan society, with its sensuality, superficiality and pretentiousness, its materialism and its egoism. These are the marks, our author means, of that old, bad order out of which the Christian has been
15 brought into the new order inaugurated by Christ. The two orders are mutually exclusive. If a man hankers after what the world can offer, love for the Father is not in him. There must

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be no compromise with the false standards of paganism. It was necessary to say this because, clearly, the kind of teaching he has in view made for compromise. It may be—we do not know—that the teachers whom the author is attacking had no conscious intention of lowering the ethical standards of the Church; but their willingness (as he sees it) to accommodate Christian doctrine to current ideas went with a general desire to minimize the difference between Christianity and the ordinary life and thought of the time. And that difference is for him real, substantial and irreconcilable.

For (and here he returns to the eschatological presupposi- 17
tions of early Christian thought) **the world** (pagan society) is an order not only temporal and transient in its character, but actually passing away before one's eyes; **the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining.** The new age has dawned, and with its coming the power and reality of the old order are broken. To belong to the new order is to have eternal life, which endures when the old order passes away. But to belong to the new order is not to lay claim to mystical experience—to say 'we know God,' or 'we are in the light,' or 'we have no sin.' It is to **do the will of God**, and this, as we have already learned, is to live by the principle of love, or charity, over against the sensuality, materialism, and self-glorification which are the marks of the old order. **He who does the will of God remains for ever**, for he belongs to the order of immortality.

This rigid separation of the Church and the world looks rather like the ascetic dualism which was common enough in the religious thought of the time. The distinction between the eternal and the temporal orders of being, the spiritual world and the world of the senses, was familiar. It was held that in order to attain to immortality it was necessary to turn away from the world of the senses and to have communion with the eternal. Many taught that for such communion it was necessary to repress bodily desires, since they are concerned with the things of sense. Such teachers would have felt themselves at one with our author in his emphatic antithesis of God and the

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world. 'I thank God,' writes one of them, 'who has put it into my mind, as touching knowledge of the Good, that it is impossible for it to exist in the world. For the world is the totality of evil, and God, the totality of good' (*Corp. Herm.*, VI. 4). The similarity, however, is not so close as it seems. By 'the world' such writers mean the material world as such. The body is evil because it is material, its desires evil because they are desires for material things. Our author means human society in so far as it is organized on wrong principles, and characterized by base desires, false values, egoism. The material world as such is God's creation. We have no reason to doubt that he would have agreed with Paul that in the material order **nothing is in itself unclean** (Rom. xiv. 14), since 'the earth is the Lord's and the fulness thereof' (1 Cor. x. 26). But an order of society based upon the primacy of material values is contrary to God's purpose for humanity. Again, the main object of these teachers of the higher paganism was the release of the individual soul from the bonds of matter, and its 'deification' through knowledge of the eternal. In their writings any allusion to social obligations is extremely rare. The Christian writer on the other hand opposes to love of 'the world' a love of God which is also love for other men, and to 'the world' as a godless and egoistic society he opposes the 'fellowship' of a community based upon mutual love. Moreover, while 'the world,' that is, godless society, **lies in the power of the evil One**, Christ is nevertheless the Saviour of all mankind; His sacrifice is available for the sins of the whole world. The dualism of God and the world is thus ultimately overcome through God's love for the world. It is true that the writer has not clearly drawn the logical conclusions from his premises. He speaks in the main as though mankind were rigorously, and permanently, divided into two classes, represented by the Church and 'the world.' This is partly because he is not here interested in anything but the practical needs of an immediate situation. Empirically, the the Church stood as a community based upon high ethical standards over against pagan society with its degraded moral standards. Compromise was easy; it must be resisted at all costs. Any kind of teaching which suggested that the differ-

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ence between Christianity and paganism was (shall we say?) one of degree rather than of kind, was a denial of the very *raison d'être* of the Church, God's new creation.

If, therefore, the teaching of this passage is not strictly dualistic or ascetic, it does inculcate a certain detachment of Christians from the secular order. We may ask how far this is really dependent upon the writer's particular eschatological beliefs, and consequently no longer applicable to Christians of our own time.

The world, which seemed to him to be trembling on the verge of dissolution, has had a reprieve of eighteen centuries and is still running. Apart from some eccentric sects, most Christians do not now suppose that there is any urgent prospect of the 'end of the world.' Then are we to say that our author's argument falls to the ground because its premise has proved false? Since this world, though no doubt transitory, is still fairly durable, is there any reason why we should not make the best of both worlds, or why the Church should not come to favourable terms with its social environment? A more ready answer to such questions might have been given in the optimistic days before 1914, than we are now prepared to give. In those days civilization seemed at last to have arrived at security and permanence, and most of us confidently expected that progress would continue indefinitely, to the 'great, far-off, divine event.' To this state of mind there was little real meaning in such a proposition as '**the world is passing away with its desire.**' To-day, however, insecurity and impermanence are the outstanding features of the world as we see it. We may not expect the world to come to an end to-morrow, but the essential transience of the whole order of civilization is no longer a theory to be complacently entertained, but a fact—to be welcomed or resented, but in any case reckoned with. It is not a matter of faith either that our civilization should persist, or that it should perish: it is a matter, not only of faith, but of observation, that it has no inherent permanence. Not only so, but if 'the world' be defined in terms of **the desire of the flesh, and the desire of the eyes, and the proud glory of life**—in other words, if, and in so far as, civilized society has the marks of

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sensuality, materialism and self-glorification, then it is self-destructive.¹ It is this, and not the merely natural transience of the material universe as such, that sets the world over against the will of God. Nor is the object of our faith the eternal as such, by virtue of its permanence over against a transient world, but God Himself as holy will, active for the salvation of men. To live in willing obedience to that will, while we move in the temporal sphere, is to dwell in the eternal world, to possess eternal life: **he who does the will of God remains for ever.**

How far the Church should in practice hold itself aloof from its social environment, and how far enter into alliance with the secular order to reform it, is largely a question of expediency dependent on changing conditions. Under the conditions of the first century, the Church had no choice. It could bear its witness only by separation from pagan society. We need not look far for indications that similar conditions might recur. Such separation, indeed, can never be complete. In the realm of thought, even the author of this epistle was substantially, though perhaps unconsciously, indebted to the higher paganism, and those early thinkers who naturalized within Christian theology the best thought of the Hellenistic world did good service to the faith. A certain spiritual tact led them to draw the line beyond which a sympathetic appreciation and co-operation would lead to harmful compromise. In other periods the Church can best serve the will of God for the salvation of men by close co-operation with the best elements in secular civilization. But it can never do so without preserving an inner detachment from everything that bears the marks of 'the world' in the Johannine sense (which does not mean an ascetic rejection of the material world). **'Love not the world, nor yet what is in the world'** is in this sense a precept always binding on the conscience of its members, and the more reasonably binding because we know that everything that **belongs not to the Father but to the world** is under sentence of dissolution. Only the will of God, and the life that is lived under that will, abides.

¹ Since the above was written, events have emphasized ominously the inherent self-destructiveness of our present civilization.

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THE TRUTH AND THE LIE (ii. 18-28)

Children, it is the last hour. You have learned that 'Antichrist 18
is coming.' Well, but many antichrists have appeared—
which makes us sure it is the last hour. They withdrew 19
from us, but they did not belong to us; had they belonged to
us, they would have remained with us, but they withdrew—
to make it plain that they are none of us. Now, you have 20
been anointed by the holy One, and you possess all know-
ledge. I am not writing to you because you do not know 21
the truth, but because you do know it, and know that no
lie belongs to the truth.

Who is the real liar? 22

who but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ?

This is 'antichrist,'

he who disowns the Father and the Son.

No one who disowns the Son can possess the Father: 23

he who confesses the Son possesses the Father as well.

Let that remain in you which you learned from the very 24
beginning; if what you learned from the very beginning
remains with you, then you will remain in the Son and in
the Father.

Now this is what he has promised you,* eternal life. I am 25
writing to you in this way about those who would deceive 26
you, but the unction you received from Him remains 27
within you, and you really need no teaching from anyone;
simply remain in Him, for His unction teaches you
about everything and is true and is no lie—remain in Him,
as it has taught you to do. Remain within Him now, my 28
dear children, so that when He appears we may have
confidence, instead of shrinking from Him in shame at
His arrival.

The writer now proceeds to a direct attack upon the false
teachers whom he has had in mind in the discussion of religious
experience in i. 5 - ii. 6. These teachers denied the real incarna-
tion of the Son of God (as we learn from iv. 3). For our author

* Reading *ὁμῶν* instead of *ἡμῶν*.

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this is the last apostasy, signified by the mystery of 'Antichrist.' To meet their claims to superior enlightenment, he recalls his readers to the sufficient revelation which every Christian has received in his initiation into the truth of the Gospel.

- 18 The connection of thought with the preceding section is by way of the eschatological ideas to which the writer has given expression. Christians, he has said, live within the new order revealed in Christ. The old order is passing away: the end of the world approaches; indeed, he now adds, it cannot longer be delayed: it is the last hour. There is proof of this.

To understand his 'proof' we must review certain elements in the eschatology which Christianity carried over from Judaism. Jewish apocalypse taught, as we have seen, that the world was under the (limited and temporary) sway of evil powers, and that in the end God would reveal His Kingdom and make an end of the 'kingdom of the adversary.' But it was a very ancient belief (going back perhaps to primitive mythology) that before that glorious consummation evil would make one last desperate stand. There would arise one supreme adversary of the cause of God, either a man of diabolical power and wickedness or a demonic being from the other world. This adversary appears as a kind of diabolical parody of God's Messiah. Hence he is called 'Antichrist.' (The term appears here for the first time in extant literature, but the idea is present long before.) In the eschatological discourse of Mark xiii. (which is probably an early Christian apocalypse based upon Jewish models, incorporating genuine sayings of Jesus), Antichrist appears in the guise of the 'Abomination of Desolation' (Mark xiii. 14, the **appalling Horror**, Moffatt), a term originally applied in the Book of Daniel (xii. 11, the **appalling abomination**, Moffatt) to the idolatrous image set up in the Temple by Antiochus Epiphanes, but here clearly applied to a person (see the Moffatt Commentary on *Mark*, *l.c.*). The Abomination of Desolation is to defile the Temple ('standing where he ought not'), and this will be the sign that the End is near. Similarly in 2 Thess. ii. 3-4 Paul foretells the appearance of the Lawless One. He too will profane the Temple by

enthroning himself there and claiming divine honours. Until he appears, the second advent of Christ is delayed. His coming will be the immediate prelude to the End. In the Book of the Revelation the myth of Antichrist is elaborated in profuse and not altogether perspicuous imagery. The rôle of the great adversary is played chiefly by the Beast, which is either identified, or closely associated, with the Roman Empire, especially in respect of the claim of the Emperor to divine honours; and here too Antichrist is destroyed by Christ at His second advent. The belief, then, was widespread in early Christianity that before Christ's second advent Antichrist would appear, and that his appearance would be the signal for the End. When therefore Antichrist is recognized, men will know that it is the last hour.

The author of the epistle believes that he has evidence that Antichrist has already appeared, '**which (he adds) makes us 18 sure it is the last hour.**' He has rationalized the myth. Antichrist is no monster from the abyss, no potentate wickedly claiming divine honours. There is in fact no single Antichrist. There are many antichrists. For wherever doctrines are taught that subvert the essential truths of the Gospel, there is Antichrist, and the false teachers are themselves in this sense antichrists (see also iv. 3).

This might seem a somewhat far-fetched interpretation of the myth. But the steps that lie behind this interpretation can be recognized. In the Marcan apocalypse it is predicted that **false Christs and false prophets will arise and perform signs and wonders to mislead the elect** (Mark xiii. 22). They are not indeed identified with the 'Abomination of Desolation,' but they play a similar rôle as antecedents of the End. Similarly, in Rev. xvi. 13, xix. 20, xx. 10 the Beast is accompanied by a **false prophet**, who shares his fate at Christ's coming. One aspect, therefore, or one concomitant, of the appearance of Antichrist is false prophecy. Prophecy was regarded as the result of inspiration: true prophecy was dictated by the Holy Spirit; false prophecy no less by a 'lying spirit' (cf. 1 Kings xxii. 15-23). If the emergence of prophecy in the Church was evidence of the presence of the Spirit of God (cf. 1 Cor. xii. 8-10; Acts ii.

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16-17), then if false prophecy emerged, was it not evidence that a diabolical spirit was at work (iv. 3; cf. 1 Cor. xii. 3)? And might not this be the revelation of Antichrist, as the Holy Spirit was a revelation of Christ's own presence with His Church (cf. 2 Cor. iii. 17-18)?

This would appear to have been our author's line of argument. He had observed with horror persons who were, or had been, members of the Church uttering 'prophecies' which contradicted the fundamental truths of the faith. (What they actually taught we shall see presently.) That they spoke under 'inspiration' he could not deny (cf. iv. 1, 3). But so shocking were their teachings that the inspiration could not be other than diabolical. This must be Antichrist! The world is coming to an end!

It is a curious argument. On the whole, the development of early Christian thought left the Antichrist myth behind. Paul has nothing further to say of it after 2 Thessalonians. It has no place in the Epistle to the Hebrews, or (as such) in the Fourth Gospel. The author of the epistle stands nearer to popular beliefs. But he too has left behind the crude mythology which bulks so largely in the Book of Revelation. The real Antichrist is for him not a person, whether human or supernatural. It is an idea—an idea no doubt embodied in persons who promulgate it, but essentially an idea, with power to poison the minds of men and pervert them from the truth. The final adversary of the truth is the lie, whoever utters it. The supreme enemy of Christ's redeeming work is radically false belief. (The quaint old notion that 'it does not matter what a man believes, so long as he leads a decent life' needs no confutation in a world buzzing with 'ideologies.') The conflict between Christ and Antichrist is fought out upon the field of the mind. 'We do not war,' says Paul, 'according to the flesh. The weapons of our warfare are not fleshly, but they are powerful with the power of God to demolish strongholds. We demolish *arguments*, and every proud thing that lifts itself up against the knowledge of God. We take captive every *thought* into the obedience of Christ' (2 Cor. x. 3-5).

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What are we to say of this doctrine that because Antichrist has appeared, in the form of deadly heresy, it is the last hour? Clearly enough, in any literal sense (and we have no reason to suppose that the writer intended any but a literal sense), it was not true. The last hour of the world did not strike, either then, or for many centuries to follow. But let us consider what Antichrist meant. The idea stood for a concentration of the powers of evil to such a degree that man must stand helpless before it, saved from despair only by the faith that now at last, at the moment of utmost need, the Lord would come. That is to say, to see Antichrist means to have a vision, it may be momentary, of a power of evil in the world (in ourselves) beyond all the resources of human wisdom and virtue, and to be thrown back without reserve upon God.

The supreme example of such a situation is the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, which is, in the 'realized eschatology' of the Gospels, the true 'last hour' of a doomed world. 'This is your hour, and the power of darkness,' says Jesus in Luke (xxii. 53). But also, as the Fourth Gospel has it, 'Now is the judgment of this world; now shall the prince of this world be cast out' (John xii. 31). For the resurrection supervenes, and Jesus is 'at the right hand of God.'

This situation recurs in the experience of the Church, when, confronted by the resurgence of deep-seated evil, it sees the day lost, but for the certainty that Christ is at the right hand of God, principalities and powers being subject to Him. If the evil is disclosed within the Church itself, if its fellowship is shaken by disloyalty to Christ (as the disciples forsook Him and fled in the hour of darkness), then the case is indeed hopeless—but for God. That was how our author saw the situation. He thought it meant, quite literally, that the world was coming to an end. That was an illusion. But it was no illusion that the Church was entering into the meaning of that last hour when the cross and resurrection of Christ revealed both the 'mystery of iniquity' (cf. 2 Thess. ii. 7), and the 'working of the strength of His might which He wrought in Christ when He raised Him from the dead' (Eph. i. 19).

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- 19 The false teachers, we learn, had been members of the Church, and had withdrawn from it. This very fact shows, says the writer, that they never had really belonged to the Church, although they were formally members of it. **Had they belonged to us, they would have remained with us.** The words which follow, **but they withdrew—to make it plain that they are none of us,** are a paraphrase of an expression in the Greek which, after the author's manner, is elliptical or compressed, and somewhat obscure. They might be understood to convey the meaning that the heretics withdrew from the Church as a formal demonstration of their fundamental divergence from its principles. But this is probably not what the writer meant. Literally, the words are to be translated, 'but in order that they might be made manifest that not all are of us.' The concluding words, taken *au pied de la lettre*, would mean, 'not all men are genuine Christians,' which is a truism. But in the context the word 'all' can readily be understood as meaning 'all members of the Church,' and the statement that not all those who are in formal communion with the visible Church belong in the true sense to the Church of Christ is an important one (cf. Rom. ix. 6). To make this fact plain was the purpose of their withdrawal. But whose purpose? Not necessarily the conscious purpose of the seceders. Let us recall the expression, frequent in the Fourth Gospel, as elsewhere in the New Testament, 'that the scripture might be fulfilled.' Where this or similar expressions are used, the final conjunction may indicate the purpose, not of the human agent, but of the overruling divine Providence. (When, for example, Matthew says, ii. 15, that the flight into Egypt took place 'in order that the word of the Lord through the prophet might be fulfilled, "Out of Egypt have I called my Son,"' he does not mean that the motive of Joseph in taking the Child and His mother into safety was a desire to fulfil prophecy. He means that he was led to do so in the providential designs of God.) So here, the probable meaning of the writer is that in God's providential care for His Church a situation was brought about in which the heretics overtly declared their disloyalty to the truth of the Gospel, instead of confusing the issue by retaining their

position as prophets and teachers within the Church. They thereby illustrated the truth that a man may be admitted to Church membership, may receive the sacraments, and may even exercise a ministry of the Word, and yet never really belong to the Church, since he has never had the root of the matter in him. In the light of long experience this lamentable fact has become a commonplace. When this epistle was written, we may suppose that an actual secession on doctrinal grounds was still a new and unfamiliar phenomenon. It was a shock to Christian feeling. But, the writer believes, it served the divine purpose, in bringing home to the conscience of the Church the solemn truth that formal membership is no guarantee that a man belongs to Christ and not to Antichrist.

He now turns to these who remain loyal. They have been 20 anointed by the holy One, and know the truth of the Gospel. What is meant by this 'anointing' we shall enquire presently. It stands in any case for something given by God, and it brings with it a knowledge which is, by the same token, a gift of God, and no human attainment. You possess all knowledge. So some MSS. read; but the older and better texts have the reading, 'You all possess knowledge.' It is a safe assumption that these early heretics, like their successors, the 'Gnostics' of the second century, laid claim to a superior *gnosis*, or knowledge of divine things, of which they deemed the ordinary Christian incapable. The writer denies this. Every Christian, in virtue of what God has given him, has saving knowledge of the truth. We may compare the similar emphasis in Col. i. 28 (a letter in which Paul is also dealing with incipient 'Gnosticism'): We train *everyone* and teach *everyone* the full scope of this knowledge, in order to set *everyone* before God mature in Christ. Indeed, the New Testament writers normally assume that the ordinary lay Christians whom they address have an effective grasp of the fundamentals of the Gospel, because they are divinely enabled to apprehend them. Thus Paul writes to the Thessalonians, You need no one to write to you upon brotherly love, for you are yourselves taught by God to love one another (1 Thess. iv. 9); and to the Romans, You are filled with knowledge of every kind, and you are well able to give advice

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to one another. Still, by way of refreshing your memory, I have written you with a certain freedom (Rom. xv. 14-15).
21a Similarly, our present author proceeds, I am not writing to you because you do not know the truth, but because you do know it. There is a note of authority in his writing, but it is not an authority which will override the judgment or conscience of his readers. On the contrary he writes with authority just because he is confident that he expresses the corporate convictions of the Church, which will be recognized as such by all humble and sincere believers.

There is light here upon the way in which the Christian tradition was both conserved and developed. Paul said that one purpose for which Christ gave a ministry to His Church was that we should not be blown from our course and swayed by every passing wind of doctrine (Eph. iv. 14). The ministry bore this responsibility through the difficult period when Christian thought was fluid, and all sorts of aberrations were possible. What bold experimentation went on, we can judge from the bewildering variety of 'heresies' described by Irenaeus and Hippolytus. It was quite possible, humanly speaking, that the main line of Christian thought should have led through a Valentinus, or a Basilides, whose intricate systems of theosophy had an attraction for many minds. If it had done so, the distinctive character of Christianity would have been largely, if not entirely, lost. The writer of this epistle is one of those who guided the thought of the Church during the obscure period of stress, admitting reinterpretations of the faith, but keeping all such reinterpretations controlled by the central convictions of the Gospel. It is to him and to others like him that we owe it that the faith emerged from the stage of fluidity with new forms of thought and expression adapted to its wider environment, but with its Gospel intact. They succeeded in their task only because they could count upon a solid body of lay Christian conviction, by no means obstinately conservative, but intelligently and experimentally grounded in the Gospel. They could count upon addressing people who, when they met with some unfamiliar form of teaching, could

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say, from a certain spiritual instinct, 'That is not the Gospel we received,' or, on the other hand, 'Yes: that is the Gospel which we received and by which we were saved.'

He assumes, then, that his readers know the truth, and, he ²¹⁵ adds, know that no lie belongs to the truth. That is to say, the false and the true are generically different: you cannot say that a lie is an 'aspect' of the truth. To suppose that it is may be a false kind of tolerance, or just muddled or lazy thinking. The situation here in view is too serious for muddled or lazy thinking. As for tolerance, at least it is clear that no one has any business to tolerate falsehood along with the truth in his own mind.

We are now to learn what the lie is. It is the denial that Jesus ²² is the Christ. The form of expression might imply that the false teachers refused to admit the Church's claim that Jesus was the Messiah predicted in biblical prophecy. This of course was the position taken by Jewish opponents of Christianity. But it is unlikely that any person who took this view should ever have been (as these heretics had been) a member of the Church. We must look elsewhere.

We know that in certain schools of 'Gnostic' thought a sharp distinction was drawn between the divine Christ, conceived as an 'emanation' from the eternal Deity, or as an 'aeon,' or member of the hierarchy of supra-mundane essences, on the one hand, and the man Jesus, on the other, and taught that the two were only temporarily, externally, and as it were accidentally connected; that the Christ descended upon Jesus at some point in His life, as, for example, at His baptism, and left Him again before His passion. It is probable that the doctrine here attacked was similar. Thinkers who took this view did not conceive themselves to be denying the doctrine of the Messiahship of Jesus. They were attempting to solve the problem set to Christian thought by the fact that the Gospel told the story of a man who lived and died in Palestine, and at the same time declared Him to be the eternal Son of God. The problem is one with which the thinkers of the Church had to grapple long in seeking an acceptable solution. The kind of

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doctrine, however, which made a distinction between 'Jesus' and 'Christ' (somewhat as some moderns attach religious value to the 'Christ-idea,' as distinct from the 'Jesus of History') was rather an evasion than a solution of the problem.

He who in this sense denies that Jesus is the Christ, says our author, **disowns in effect the Father and the Son.** For Christian theism acknowledges God as revealed in Jesus Christ; and this is not the same thing as belief in absolute Being, or eternal Reason, or the Unfathomable Depth, or any other of the abstractions which in various Gnostic systems stood for God, even though such an abstraction might be called by the name of 'the First Father' or the like, and might be held to be mediated to the world by an 'emanation' or 'aeon' described as His 'Son,' or even as 'Christ.' The Gospel speaks of 'the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.' If Jesus is not the Christ, the content of the Christian revelation of God is disintegrated, and in this sense **no one who disowns the Son can possess the Father, while he who confesses the Son possesses the Father as well.**

The doctrine that our access to God depends upon the acknowledgment of His Son runs through the Fourth Gospel (John xii. 44-5, xiv. 6-9, etc.). It has sanction in a traditional saying of Jesus given by Matthew and Luke from their common tradition: 'No one knows the Son except the Father, nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and he to whom the Son chooses to reveal Him' (Matt. xi. 27; cf. Luke x. 22).

Further, the antithesis drawn between 'confessing' Christ and 'disowning' Him recalls another saying of the Lord in the Synoptic Gospels, where the same two verbs are used in antithesis (though the fact is disguised in the Moffatt translation):

'Everybody who shall confess me before men
I will confess him before my Father in heaven;
And whoever shall disown me before men,
I will disown him before my Father in heaven'

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(Matt. x. 32-3; similarly in Luke xii. 8; cf. also Mark viii. 38). The saying is clearly alluded to in Rev. iii. 5, and probably also in Rom. x. 9-10: **Confess with your mouth that 'Jesus is Lord,' believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, and you will be saved; for with his heart man believes and is justified; with his mouth he confesses and is saved.**

The currency of this saying in fact probably goes far to account for the special weight and solemnity attaching to the words 'confess' and 'confession' in all early Christian thought (cf. also Heb. iv. 14, x. 23, and xiii. 13-15, where the allusion is probably to the confession of the name of Christ, for which Christians suffered persecution; 1 Pet. iv. 14-16). But our present passage is more closely moulded upon the saying of Jesus than any of the others. It has the same antithetical form, and (if we allow for a certain theological development) its purport is substantially the same. According to Matt. x. 32-3, the confession of Christ establishes solidarity with Him, by which our standing before God is guaranteed. So here to confess Christ is to **possess the Father**—or as it is expressed in iv. 16, **to remain in God** (quasi-mystical categories being substituted for the quasi-forensic categories of Matt. x. 32-3). As for the content of the confession itself, it is here given in terms identical with the confession of Peter in Mark viii. 29. In iv. 15 it takes the form **Jesus is the Son of God**, which recalls the Matthaean addition to Peter's confession, **Son of the living God** (Matt. xvi. 16). Both these may be compared with the Pauline confession, 'Jesus is Lord.'

The interest of these comparisons is to show how closely the author is basing himself upon the common tradition of early Christianity, incorporating the teaching of Jesus Himself. It is only in iv. 2, where it is necessary to put the Church's confession beyond all possibility of misunderstanding, against the aberrations of heretical teachers, that specifically 'Johannine' language is used: **every spirit which confesses Jesus as the Christ incarnate.**

The writer does not here make any attempt to discuss the theological problem which is involved in the confession of Jesus as the Christ, the eternal Son of God. He no doubt

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assumes that his readers are acquainted with the Fourth Gospel, in which this problem is dealt with in masterly fashion—or, if not with the written Gospel, at least with the Johannine
24 teaching which it embodies. What he is here concerned to urge is that his readers shall hold fast to that which is the presupposition of all Christian doctrine—namely, the fundamental content of the Gospel, **that which you learned from the very beginning**. If this remains in you, he says, **then you will remain in the Son and in the Father**.

As we have seen (note on ii. 5-6), this type of expression is analogous with language used to describe the experience of 'mystical union.' It is adopted in the Fourth Gospel for that intimate union with God in Christ which is the result of the love of God manifested in the life and death of Jesus, to which the love of man responds in obedience and trust. (See, especially, John xv. 1-10, xvii. 21-3.) In the discourse on the Bread of Life we read, **He who feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, as I remain in him. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live by the Father, so he who feeds on me will also live by me. . . . He who feeds on this bread will live for ever**
25 (John vi. 56-8). This promise of eternal life the writer now recalls, assuring his readers that the blessed hope of everlasting life is not based upon any theosophical speculations, but upon the Gospel of the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

26-27 The writer now returns to the point with which he is immediately concerned—the warning against false teaching—and he develops what he has already said briefly about Christians being **anointed by the holy One**. We must now raise the question: What is meant by the anointing, or unction? The actual word used is *chrisma*, which is Englished as 'chrism.' It does not occur elsewhere in the New Testament. It is derived from a verb which means to 'rub over' or 'smear.' The noun should by its grammatical form signify, concretely, that which is smeared or rubbed on, such as paint, or whitewash, or (in particular) oil. It can however also be used, abstractly, of the act of smearing, and in the Greek Old Testament it is commonly used of the act of anointing with oil. In verse 27 the concrete significance seems to be called for, since the chrism is

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something which remains within you and teaches you, though it is not at once clear what this 'something' is. That it is literally the oil used for anointing is altogether unlikely. We may take it that whatever metaphorical sense of the word may be intended, it is based upon the use of the verb and the noun with reference to anointing with oil, especially as a ritual act.

Anointing was among the Hebrews a rite of consecration. Priests, prophets, and kings were anointed in token of their consecration to Jehovah. In common parlance, 'the anointed priest,' or simply, 'the Anointed,' meant the High Priest, whose office was a specially solemn one of mediation between God and the people. More specifically, 'God's Anointed,' or simply, 'the Anointed,' meant the ideal figure of the future, variously conceived, in and through whom God's purpose for His people should be finally fulfilled. In this sense the expression was taken over into Christianity. We are accustomed either to adapt the Hebrew or Aramaic word, following the example of the Fourth Gospel, and to speak of 'the Messiah,' or else to follow the other writers of the New Testament, and to use the Greek equivalent, *Christos*, Englished as 'Christ.' The original and fundamental confession of Christianity is in Peter's words, 'Thou art the Messiah' (Mark viii. 29). The question could not but arise: How and when was Jesus 'anointed'? There was no record of His having received the anointing of king or priest. But the tradition affirmed that He had received consecration to the Messianic office at His baptism, when the Holy Spirit descended upon Him. This, then, in accordance with the prophecy of Isa. lxi. 1 (cited in Luke iv. 18), was the 'anointing' by virtue of which Jesus was the 'Anointed,' the Messiah or Christ. So the apostolic Preaching as given in Acts x. 38 declared how God 'anointed Jesus of Nazareth with Holy Spirit and power.' There is no other place in the New Testament where the expression 'to anoint with Holy Spirit' occurs, though there is a passage cited from the apocryphal Gospel according to the Hebrews where the prophets are said to have been 'anointed with holy Spirit.' In 2 Cor. i. 21 we read, 'It is

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God who guarantees us together with you in Christ, and who anointed us; He who also sealed us, and gave us the earnest of the Spirit in our hearts.' The collocation of the words 'Christ' and 'anointed' (*Christos* and *chrisas*) shows that Paul has in mind the Messianic consecration as shared by those who are of 'the Body of Christ.' (Christ is the inclusive representative of the People of God as a corporate personality; see Moffatt Commentary, *Romans*, pp. 78-80). It is not, however, said that Christians are 'anointed with the Holy Spirit'; they are 'anointed'—that is, consecrated—in solidarity with Christ, and the 'seal' or guarantee of this fact is the presence of the Holy Spirit in the heart. Such appears to be the Apostle's meaning.

This is (apart from our present passage) the only place in the New Testament where Christians are said to be 'anointed' (in any sense). It is hardly sufficient to account for the use of 'chrism' here as a technical term, which the readers are expected to recognize; for such it seems to be. We must look elsewhere for a clue. We could understand the writer's choice of the term if it were taken from the vocabulary of the heretics whom he is attacking. That it was used by them is made probable by the following considerations.

In each place where the term 'chrism' is introduced, the word 'you' is extremely emphatic in the Greek; indeed, in the second place (verse 27) emphasis is obtained by a construction which is strictly ungrammatical, though not illegitimate in usage. We must suppose that 'you' are contrasted with some other group. In view of the considerations adduced in pp. 9-16, it is improbable that the contrast to 'you' is 'we.' Probably a contrast is intended between 'you,' i.e. true believers, and heretics. Let us then try to bring out this emphasis in translation: 'They withdrew in order that it might be made clear that not all (formal members of the Church) belong to us. *You too* have an unction, an unction from the holy One, and you all possess knowledge. . . . I am writing to you in this way about those who would lead you astray; and *as for you*, the unction you received from Him remains in you.' This way of speaking would have a sharp point if the heretics claimed to have been

'anointed' in some special way which ensured to them a superior *gnosis* or knowledge of divine things. Have we any reason to suppose that such a claim was made?

In a document cited by Hippolytus as representing a 'Gnostic' sect known as Naassenes, we read, 'We alone of all men are Christians, who complete the mystery at the third portal, and are anointed there with speechless chrism' (*Philosophumena*, V. 9. 121-2). The anointing here (probably an actual anointing with oil) is clearly some form of initiation into a mystery. The background of the thought is not the Hebrew and primitive Christian idea of the Messianic consecration, but rituals of anointing such as we know to have been employed in some pagan mysteries. The writer appears to claim that only those who have undergone this special initiation are worthy to be called Christians. Language of this kind could be taken over by orthodox writers. Thus Ignatius (who often uses quasi-Gnostic language) writes: 'Be not anointed with the ill-odour of the doctrine of the Prince of this world, lest he take you captive from the life that is set before you. Why do we not all become wise, receiving the knowledge of God, which is Jesus Christ' (Epl. xvii. 1-2). Ignatius contrasts the true *gnosis* with the false. Initiation into false doctrine he describes (metaphorically) as anointing with ill-odour. (A different verb is used, but its sense is the same.) It is implied that initiation into true *gnosis* could also be described as anointing, only with a different chrism. This true initiation, he emphasizes, is open to *all* Christians. Our author similarly speaks of the true chrism, by virtue of which *all* Christians know the truth—all Christians, and not only those who have received some special initiation; and this chrism is by implication contrasted with the false doctrine that is infecting the Church.

It seems probable therefore that, though the concept of anointing as consecration belonged to the earliest Christian thought as an inheritance from the Messianic ideas of Judaism, yet the immediate background of the present passage is rather that of Hellenistic religion; and 'anointing' suggests initiation into *gnosis*, or supernatural knowledge. But we have still to ask: What is the chrism, which is at once the

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medium of initiation and the abiding source of a growing knowledge of God?

If rites of initiation are in question, the one such rite which *all* Christians undergo is Baptism. It is reasonable to suppose that the chrism is something connected with Baptism. One view is that it stands for the divine grace conferred in the Sacrament. Indeed, one manuscript actually reads *charisma* ('gift of grace') for *chrisma*; but this is certainly an erroneous reading. That 'chrism' however stands for grace is not impossible; but something more particular than the general notion of grace seems to be called for here, where it is a matter specifically of communication of *knowledge*. Most commentators suppose that the reference is to the Holy Spirit. If we substitute the term 'Spirit' for 'chrism' we get a good sense: The Spirit you received from Him (in Baptism) remains in you and you really need no teaching from anyone; simply remain in Him, for His Spirit teaches you about everything, and is true and is no lie. This is in harmony with what is said about the Spirit as Paraclete in John xiv. 16-17, 26. On the other hand, the author of the Epistle, when he comes to give his own doctrine of the Spirit, does not bring it into connection with the chrism. His teaching in iv. 1-6 is not that doctrine must be tested by inspiration, but that inspiration must be tested by the Gospel (see notes on that passage). Further, if the parallel from Ignatius be admitted, the false unction is 'the teaching of the Prince of this world'; and we must suppose that the true unction is also in some way a kind of teaching. We now observe that ii. 24 prescribes a prophylactic against the poison of false teaching as follows: Let that remain in you which you learned from the very beginning; if what you learned from the very beginning remains in you, then you will remain in the Son and in the Father. The parallel between this passage and ii. 27, which speaks of the unction which remains within you, is unmistakable. That which you learned from the very beginning is the Gospel itself, the Word of God, which is said to 'remain in' the believer, as the chrism does in verse 27. Similarly, in John xv. 7, Christ says, If you remain in me and *my words* remain in you, then ask whatever you like and

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you shall have it, while, on the other hand, in John v. 38 he says to the unbelieving Jews, 'You have not His word remaining in you' [the Moffatt translation again disguises the similarity of the language]. We have here the conception of the Gospel or Word of God, not as a mere set of propositions which may be 'kept in mind,' but as an indwelling power (in accordance with antique ideas of the almost independent reality of the spoken word, which are especially acute in Hebrew thought, but occur also among the Greeks from Homer onward).

In view of all this, it seems natural to conclude that the 'chrism,' which confers knowledge of God, and is also a prophylactic against the poison of false teaching, is the Word of God, that is, the Gospel, or the revelation of God in Christ, as communicated in the rule of faith to catechumens, and confessed in Baptism. This is the Christian's initiation, by water and the Word. So long as the Word (which is true and is no lie) remains within him—that is to say, so long as that which he learned from the beginning is not merely kept in mind, but continues to be a living power in him, controlling his thoughts, affections and will, he really needs no teaching from anyone (though such teaching may be useful for developing the implications of the Gospel), since by virtue of it he remains in the Son and in the Father, possesses knowledge of God, and receives further teaching as the occasion demands.

Whether we understand the chrism to be the Holy Spirit, or the Word of God, may perhaps make little ultimate difference to the essential purport of the passage. But there is a difference in the point of view. The appeal to the indwelling Spirit easily declines into an appeal to the individual experience of 'inspiration.' If such experience is made the criterion, persons with little grasp of the central truths of the Gospel may mistake their own 'inspirations' (or bright ideas) for the truth of God, and so the corporate, historical tradition of Christianity is imperilled. Our writer found that this was actually happening within his sphere of influence (see iv. 1-6). If, on the other hand, we are referred to the Gospel itself, which is a recital of what God did for us in the life, teaching, death and

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resurrection of Jesus Christ—to the Gospel not as merely heard, believed and remembered, but as livingly apprehended and retained as a power in our lives—then there is an objective standard by which the faith of the Church is kept true to what is distinctive in the Christian revelation. The interior testimony of the Holy Spirit is confirmation of the *datum* in the Gospel (see iv. 13).

- 28 The whole section dealing with the danger of false teaching is now rounded off with an appeal to the loyal members of the Church, echoing a thought that has run all through it: **Remain within Him.** A special motive is now added. If this is the last hour, then the Lord may be expected shortly to come again. Just as Paul had written, 'We are ambitious to be well-pleasing to Him; for we must all appear before the judgment-seat of Christ' (2 Cor. v. 9-10), so our author appeals to this 'ambition' of every loyal Christian, **that when He appears we may have confidence instead of shrinking from Him in shame at His arrival.** We can hardly miss a reminiscence of sayings attributed to Jesus in the Gospels: **Whoever is ashamed of me and my words in this disloyal and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels** (Mark viii. 38). **Everyone who will confess me before men, I will confess him before my Father in heaven; and whoever will disown me before men, I will disown him before my Father in heaven** (Matt. x. 32-3; cf. Luke xii. 8-9). On the authority of these words (to which we have already noted an allusion in ii. 22), **he who confesses the Son will remain in union with Him, and can look forward with serene confidence to meeting Him.**

The Lord did not return, in the way He was expected to come, shortly after the writing of this epistle. When Christian thought adapted itself to the fact of this delay, the urgency of the appeal to an immediately impending second advent was lost. Attempts to revive it, under the illusion that at particular periods the signs of the times pointed to the end of the world in the near future, have always been artificial and disappointing. With a deeper penetration, the Fourth Evangelist taught that by His resurrection and the gift of the Spirit Christ came

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to His people, never to leave them again (John xiv. 15-18, 23, xvi. 16-22). At any moment the shame of denial may cause us to shrink from Him; at any moment, remaining in Him, we may have confidence in His presence. The Last Judgment, in all its solemnity and decisiveness, waits upon us in the midst of time.

Nevertheless, our experience in time has an end. The whole unknown future, beginning from the incompleteness of the present moment, is telescoped for us, in our sheer ignorance of what a day may bring forth, into a mere transition from time to eternity. For the world, time to come may prove to be measured in years or in millenniums; for each individual it cannot in any case be long. Death places us in the immediate presence of the Lord, for it sets us beyond time. It would be a pity if we should then shrink from Him in shame.

II. LIFE IN THE FAMILY OF GOD

(ii. 29 - iv. 12)

The second main section of the epistle is built about the central theme that Christians are children of God. They are 'born of God' (regenerate), and together make up a family in which all are brothers with God as their Father. The bond of union in the family is that divine love which is, at once and indistinguishably, the love which God showed to us in Christ, the love which we accord Him in return, and the charity we are bound to exercise towards one another. Indeed, 'God is love,' and all that can be said about life in the Christian family depends directly upon that far-reaching theological affirmation.

This main theme is treated in various aspects, without strict continuity of argument, and there are several divagations or excursions, notably one (iv. 1-6) which, while it is a parenthesis in the present argument, reverts to one of the principal interests of the epistle, the danger of false teaching which denies the Incarnation.

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I. THE CHILDREN OF GOD, THEIR PREROGATIVES AND OBLIGATIONS; WITH AN EXCURSUS UPON THE NATURE AND GRAVITY OF SIN (ii. 29 - iii. 10)

- 29 As you know He is just, be sure that everyone who practises
iii. righteousness is born of Him. 'Born of Him!' Think what
1 a love the Father has for us, in letting us be called 'children
of God!' And such we are. The world does not recognize
2 us? That is simply because it did not recognize Him. We
are children of God now, beloved; what we are to be is not
apparent yet, but we do know that when He appears we
3 are to be like Him—for we are to see Him as He is. And
everyone who rests this hope on Him, purifies himself as
4 He is pure. Everyone who commits sin commits lawless-
5 ness: sin is lawlessness, and you know He appeared to take
6 our sins away. In Him there is no sin; anyone who remains
in Him does not sin—anyone who sins has neither seen nor
7 known Him. Let no one deceive you, dear children: he who
practises righteousness is just, as He is just; he who com-
8 mits sin belongs to the devil, for the devil is a sinner from
the very beginning. (This is why the Son of God appeared,
9 to destroy the deeds of the devil.) Anyone who is born of
God does not commit sin, for the offspring of God remain
in Him, and they cannot sin, because they are born of God.
10 Here is how the children of God and the children of the
devil are recognized; anyone who does not practise right-
eousness does not belong to God,¹ and neither does he who
has no love for his brother.

¹ The expression 'to belong to God' represents the Greek *ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ εἶναι*. The preposition *ἐκ* properly means 'out of,' and is used to indicate the point of origin or departure. It has, however, various extended uses, and one of these is to express a more or less vague relation of dependence or attachment. This vague sense is represented here, and in other passages of the Moffatt translation of the epistle, by the English verb 'to belong.' The actual meaning intended by the writer is not quite clear. In this place it looks as if *ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ*, with its literal meaning 'originating out of God,' were intended as a briefer synonym for 'born of God,' or 'children of God,' and if so, then *ἐκ τοῦ διαβόλου* in verse 8 would mean 'born of the devil' and would be the equivalent of 'children of the devil' in 10. But the author may deliberately have used the vaguer expression here and in some other places. It is however well for the reader to bear in mind that the Moffatt translation habitually uses the verb 'to belong' to render a Greek expression which in any particular case may well bear a more definite meaning.

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Verse 29 forms a transition, in the author's manner, from the foregoing section to the following, and might be attached to either. The connection with the foregoing is perhaps through the thought of 'the Lord the righteous Judge'; though it is clear that attention is passing from the Son to the Father. While the 'He' of the first clause might refer to either, the 'Him' of the last clause is clearly the Father. The purpose of the verse is to introduce the idea of divine generation, which is to be elaborated in what follows. God is righteous. [There is no need to vary the translation: all through this part of the epistle 'just' and 'righteous' represent the same Greek word, and 'righteousness' represents the derived substantive.] The Christian who practises righteousness (or in the language of the earlier part of the epistle lives and moves within the light, walks as Christ walked, or obeys the command of love) is born of God.

That God is our Father and we His children is a thought several times expressed in the Synoptic sayings of Jesus. In Paul this thought is set forth in the doctrine of 'adoption.' As Christ is the Son of God, we who are 'in Christ,' members of His Body, are adopted by God as His sons, in token whereof the Spirit within us cries 'Abba, Father' (see Rom. viii. 14-17, 1 Cor. i. 9, Gal. iii. 26-7, iv. 6-7, etc.). The Pauline doctrine makes clear what is always implied in the biblical idea of the Fatherhood of God—namely, that we are sons of God by His grace and not in our own right (see Moffatt Commentary, *Romans*, pp. 130-1). In the Old Testament Israel is the 'son' of Jehovah because Jehovah chose the children of Israel as objects of His love, called them into a covenant with Himself, and so set up a relation between God and man which is, morally and spiritually, that of father and child. In paganism, tribes, or their chiefs and kings, were believed to be actual descendants of a deity. This belief, in a more refined and elevated form, becomes the doctrine that man as such (or the spiritual part of man) is the offspring of God (as we have it in the pagan poet quoted in Acts xvii. 28); or, in other words, a kind of emanation of the Divine (cf. notes on iii. 9, pp. 74-6). This is not the biblical, or Christian, doctrine. God created man in His

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image, out of the dust of the earth, and the 'natural' relation of men to God is one of creaturely dependence. It is of His grace that they enter into the spiritual relation of children. In 1 Pet. i. 23 this thought is expressed in the words, **You are born anew of immortal, not of mortal seed, by the living, lasting word of God.**

The antecedents of the idea of regeneration lie not within Judaism, but in Hellenistic thought. It is found in some mystery religions; and in the higher paganism, or 'Hellenistic mysticism,' the initiation into *gnosis* is sometimes represented as a process of regeneration (as, for example, in *Corpus Hermeticum*, XIII—a late dialogue, probably of the third century). The Fourth Evangelist adopts the idea, both in the Prologue (i. 12) and in the dialogue with Nicodemus (iii. 3-8), placing it in the essentially Christian context of the Kingdom of God and the Holy Spirit, and connecting it with the sacrament of Baptism, by which a man becomes a member of the Church. The phrase used in our present passage, here translated '**born of God**', occurs in John i. 13 (where it is differently translated). The idea which it expresses is one of the cardinal ideas of the Epistle. In view of its connection in Hellenistic thought with initiation into knowledge of the divine, we may suspect that '**born of God**,' like '**knowing God**,' and '**in the light**' (see notes on ii. 4, 9), was an expression used, and in our author's view misused, by the false teachers. At its first introduction, therefore, he emphasizes the point that its true connotation is an ethical one. It is he who practises righteousness who can rightly be said to be **born of God**, just as in Matt. v. 45 it is those who love their enemies who are sons of the Father in heaven. In enforcing the ethical criterion our author is simply following the fundamental tradition of the teaching of Jesus.

iii.

- i Having thus safeguarded the ethical purport of the doctrine of divine generation, the writer now takes up the phrase **children of God**, which was already current in Christian circles, and was used, in particular, in the work which was for him most authoritative, the Gospel according to John (i. 12, xi. 52). Behind this lie such sayings of the Lord as Matt. v. 9, 45. In

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these sayings the term used is 'sons of God.' In Johannine circles it appears that the term 'Son of God' was reserved exclusively for the 'only-begotten Son,' and the term 'children' substituted when believers were spoken of. It appears, however, that our author had in mind the word of Jesus recorded in Matt. v. 9, 'they will be *called* sons of God.' [The Moffatt rendering obscures the identity of the verb.] He would have his readers consider how deep is the meaning of such an appellation. In harmony with the whole biblical tradition he regards this filial relation to God not as something inherent in human nature, but as due wholly to the love of God. It is a pure act of grace that allows us to be *called* 'children of God.' Nor are we merely *called* God's children: *such we are*; born of Him, 'partakers of the divine nature' (2 Pet. i. 4). As the Fourth Gospel has it, we have passed by regeneration out of the sphere of 'flesh' into the sphere of 'spirit' (John iii. 5-6); or, as Paul put it, there is a *new creation* whenever a man comes to be in Christ (2 Cor. v. 17). That is to say, in the children of God a new kind of humanity has emerged. Similarly, in the Hermetic tractate *On Regeneration* we read, 'He who is born (again) will be another person'; and the initiate says, 'I am now not what I was before' (*Corpus Hermeticum*, XIII. 2, 3). So far our author will go with 'Hellenistic mysticism.' The Christian is (by grace of God) in some real sense a supernatural being.

It is true that he is not ostensibly different from other men. The world does not recognize us as children of God. What of that? Did it recognize Jesus Christ as other than an ordinary man? (For 'Him' here probably refers, not to the Father, but to the Son.) Yet He, we know, was the Son of God. In us, as in Him during His incarnate life, the divine sonship is veiled. But it will not always be so. Paul deals with the same theme 2 in the Epistle to the Colossians. He too taught that Christians possess, by grace of God, a supernatural life. His favourite way of expressing this is, not in terms of regeneration (an idea of which he shows no knowledge), but through the concept of the Christian as dead and risen with Christ. So in Col. iii. 1-4 he says, *You have been raised with Christ*, but he hastens to add,

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Your life is hidden with Christ in God; not, however, hidden for ever: when Christ, who is our life, appears, then you will appear with Him in glory. This is the 'revelation of the children of God,' for which the whole creation waits (Rom. viii. 19). Similarly, our author, affirming that in spite of appearances Christians are here and now children of God, looks forward to a fresh stage of existence in which they will be something more glorious still. What that 'something' is, is a question upon which we must be content to remain in ignorance at present: what we are to be is not apparent yet. But so much we can say with assurance: when He appears, we are to be like Him. Similarly Paul had said, God decreed of old that those whom He predestined should share the likeness of His Son (Rom. viii. 29).

But our author gives a fresh turn to the thought. In the clause, we are to see Him as He is, he is alluding to that 'vision of God' to which all mystics aspire. Whether the pronouns 'He' and 'Him' refer to the Father or the Son is, here as elsewhere, not quite clear, though the latter is in the context more natural. But it makes little difference, for in Johannine thought to see the Son is to see the Father (cf. John xii. 45, xiv. 9). Our mysterious but glorious destiny, therefore, includes the vision of God, or of Christ, in His true being. In most of the New Testament not much is said about the hope of the vision of God (Matt. v. 8 and Heb. xii. 14, the latter referring primarily to Christ, are the only clear cases; and note that in Matt. v. 8-9 the ideas of seeing God and being His children are in close contiguity, as here). But in the Fourth Gospel it is a frequent theme. Starting from the proposition, Nobody has ever seen God, but God has been unfolded by the divine One, the only Son (i. 18), it expounds the whole ministry of Jesus Christ as the realization of the hope of the vision of God and His glory, under the conditions of time and space. In the farewell discourses, when the incarnate life is drawing to a close, Christ promises a further vision of Himself (xiv. 19, etc.), a promise conceived as being fulfilled, in the first place, by the resurrection and the coming of the Spirit. Finally, He prays that His followers may be beside me where I am, to behold my glory in the eternal world (xvii. 24). It is here, doubtless, that

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our author finds direct authority for his teaching in this place.

Grammatically, the clause 'for we are to see Him as He is' might be connected (in the Greek as in the English) either (a) with the words **we know**, or (b) with the words **we are to be like Him**. (a) If we adopt the former construction, the meaning is, 'We are to be like Him: this we know because we are to see Him as He is.' The latter is the premise (itself guaranteed by John xvii. 24) from which the conclusion is drawn that we are to be like Christ. But the argument demands another premise which is unexpressed; those who are to see God must be like God. The maxim 'Like is known by like' is frequently enunciated by Hellenistic religious writers in this sense. (b) If we adopt the latter construction, the meaning is 'because we shall see God, we shall (as we know) become like Him.' The presupposition of this is the doctrine that the vision, or knowledge, of God makes a man like God. There is no direct authority for this doctrine in the New Testament, but it was widely accepted in 'Hellenistic mysticism,' in the sense that through *gnosis*, direct knowledge of God, a man might become immortal and even divine. It makes no important difference which of these two interpretations we adopt, but it is interesting to observe that in either case our author is assuming principles which he held in common, not only with the 'Gnostic' teachers whom he is combating, but with the higher thought of the Hellenistic world in general. He is naturalizing within Christian theology a widely diffused mystical tradition. But a recognition of this fact enables us to see more clearly where his Christian interpretation of this tradition is distinctive, as the following verses will show.

The profound thought to which he has given such simple and moving expression has entered deeply into the Christian consciousness. The reserve which he exercises about our future destiny, discouraging all fruitless speculation, combined with the serene certainty that we shall see our Lord and be like Him, is the model for all our thinking about the life to come.

We now come to an all-important corollary of the Christian hope. If we are to be like Christ hereafter, we must practise that

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likeness by imitating Him here and now, imitating Him (in particular) in purity of living. It is **the pure in heart who will see God** (Matt. v. 8). It is idle to speak of seeing or knowing God, if we are content to live in sin. The argument returns to the theme which was in view in 1. 5 – ii. 11. **In Him there is no darkness,**

6 **we were there told; and that means, in Him there is no sin.** God is all light, all goodness; and the Son who reveals the Father reveals His sinless perfection. Consequently, **anyone who remains in Him does not sin—anyone who sins has neither seen nor known Him.**

4 In speaking of sin, the author wishes to make clear, he is speaking of actual infraction of the moral law; and similarly, when he speaks of being righteous, he means practising righteousness (verse 7)—that is, doing what is right. It appears that it was necessary to say this because there was a tendency to use the term 'righteousness' with an artificial connotation, as though a man might be righteous in a religious sense even though his actual conduct showed no marked conformity with recognized moral standards. There are pretty clear hints in the epistles of Paul that his teaching was misconstrued in this way. He taught that the Christian was 'justified' (declared righteous) by grace. Some said, **remain on in sin, so that there may be all the more grace** (Rom. vi. 1), implying that the status of 'righteousness' might be maintained without (in our author's words) **practising righteousness.** But we need not look for any particular heretical doctrine here. Religion and morality are not inherently identical spheres of experience. There is always the possibility that religious categories may not coincide with the corresponding ethical categories. In the Old Testament the prophets have to protest against a view which identifies sin with breach of taboo instead of with injustice, cruelty, impurity and the like; and righteousness with the punctual observance of feasts and fasts, instead of with justice and humanity. And within the Christian community it is not always clear that a deep 'sense of sin' goes with a sensitiveness to social obligations unfulfilled. Any strongly ethical religion (like Judaism or Christianity) has constantly to be on its guard lest 'religious experience,' whether mystical or

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sacramental, should lose its ethical content, or 'cold morality' forget its religious sanctions. This is our author's concern.

His maxim **Sin is lawlessness**, if considered as a general definition of sin, must be considered somewhat superficial, in contrast, for example, with Paul's treatment of the theme (see the Moffatt Commentary, *Romans*, pp. 50-51, 79-83). But his intention is to insist that in the whole discussion the terms 'sin' and 'righteousness' shall be taken in their plain, crude sense: sin is doing wrong; righteousness is doing right. Or this, **let no one deceive you** with any subtle sophistry which blurs the plain meaning of such terms.

If we thus keep crude actuality in view, we shall appreciate 5 the teaching of the Gospel that Christ **appeared to take our sins away**. The immediate authority for this teaching is, once again, to be found in the Fourth Gospel, which speaks of Christ as **the lamb of God, who is to remove** (take away: the same word in the Greek) **the sin of the world** (i. 29). (The Evangelist thinks of 'sin' as a principle or quality of life, expressing itself variously in thought, word and deed; the author of the epistle thinks of 'sins,' the multiform outward expression of the sinful principle). In other words, Christ came to **destroy** 8 **the deeds of the devil** (cf. Matt. xii. 25-29, Luke x. 18, Col. ii. 15, 1 Pet. iii. 22, etc.; and especially John xii. 31). **The devil is a sinner from the very beginning**; but he has no hold on Christ (John xiv. 30), in whom **there is no sin** (verse 5). Hence, to sin (meaning to break the moral law, to do wrong) is to **belong to the devil**: to **remain in Christ** is to be righteous as He is righteous (meaning to practise righteousness, to do right, verse 7).

It is all very plain black-and-white. It had to be made so, if the readers were to be sufficiently warned against the dangers of sophistication. Sophistry can as easily prove that evil is an aspect of good as that error is an aspect of truth. But truth and falsehood, good and evil, right and wrong, God and the devil, are irreconcilable opposites. True religion means belonging to God, and therefore it means standing on the side of truth and goodness, to the exclusion of their opposites.

This is now applied to the doctrine of divine generation. If ⁹⁻10

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by being born of God you mean 'enlightment', or initiation into a superior grade of 'knowledge,' then this is mere delusion unless the ethical test is satisfied: **anyone who is born of God does not commit sin** (i.e. do wrong); **anyone who does not practise righteousness** (i.e. do right) **does not belong to God, but is among the children of the devil.**

- 9 The argument is supported in verse 9 by a somewhat obscure clause. Literally translated, it runs as follows: 'Everyone who is born of God does not commit sin, because his seed remains in him.' Dr. Moffatt has taken the word 'seed' (*sperma*) as a collective noun, meaning 'offspring,' as 'seed of Abraham' (Luke i. 55, Gal. iii. 29, John viii. 33, 37) means 'offspring' or 'posterity of Abraham,' and he has substituted 'of God' for 'his' to make the meaning clear. The expression 'seed of God' in this sense is not found in the New Testament, but it could find support in parallels elsewhere. The offspring of God, then, is taken as a collective equivalent for **anyone who is born of God**, and is the subject of the verb remain (Moffatt gives the verb in the plural, since 'offspring' is plural in sense). The same expression is the subject of the verbs in the following clause: **the offspring of God cannot sin because they are (it is) born of God.** This gives excellent sense, being closely parallel to verse 6: **anyone who remains in Him does not sin.**

Other interpreters take the word 'seed' as carrying on the metaphor of generation. This may be aptly illustrated from the Hermetic tractate, *On Regeneration*: 'I know not,' says the would-be initiate, 'from what womb a man is born (again), and of what seed.' 'My child,' replies Hermes, '(the womb is) intellectual wisdom (conceiving) in silence, and the seed is the true Good' (*Corp. Herm.*, XIII. 1-2). The divine act of generation is thought of (on analogy with the physical act) as implanting a divine principle from which the new nature of the children of God is produced. This divine principle, once implanted, **remains in the child of God** (for the word 'him' then refers, not to God, but to the man who is born of God), and it is this divine principle, now immanent in the man, which keeps him from sinning. The subject of the verbs in the last clause of verse 9 (which are both singular, not

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plural, in the Greek) is then the same as that of the first clause, and the sense is: anyone who is born of God not only does not, but cannot sin, because he is born of God, and a divine seed remains in him.

So far as the grammatical form of expression is concerned, the former way of interpreting the passage has the advantage that it gives to the expression 'remains in him' the usual sense, in which the subject of the verb is the Christian man, and 'Him' refers to God. On the other hand, it has two (not very decisive) drawbacks: (a) The clause 'his seed' lacks in Greek the definite article, which is properly required if the expression is to be the equivalent of **anyone who is born of God**, and is in fact inserted in the translation, **the offspring of God**. Some writers, it is true, are loose in their use of the article, in particular such New Testament writers as are under Semitic influence. This writer, however, does not semitize, and is usually precise in his use of the article. If the meaning of the phrase is 'a divine seed,' i.e. a divine principle implanted, then the definite article is not required. (b) If 'the seed of God' is a synonym for **anyone who is born of God**, then there is an unnecessary tautology. The meaning could in that case have been equally well given by writing, 'Anyone who is born of God does not commit sin, for he remains in Him and cannot sin.' If, on the other hand, we take the view that 'the seed of God' is a divine principle implanted in man, we have a perfect parallelism of clauses:

'Everyone born of God does not commit sin,
because His seed remains in him:
and he cannot sin,
because he is born of God.'

As parallelism is a notable feature of this writer's style, there is a certain presumption in favour of this line of interpretation.

In order to decide the question, we must have regard to the wider context of thought. In 'Hellenistic mysticism' and in the Christian or near-Christian 'Gnosticism' affiliated to it, the doctrine of a divine principle implanted in human nature is one of the most constant elements. To give some examples:

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In the Hermetic tractate *Poimandres* we learn that there is resident in men an 'essential Man,' the offspring of the supreme God ('the Father of all, who is life and light'), and it is possible for this essential humanity in us to be liberated, by enlightenment or *gnosis*, from the bonds of matter, and to ascend again to the Father (*Corp. Herm.*, I. 12-15, 24-26). Philo (who is strongly under the influence of Hellenistic speculation) similarly speaks of a 'real Man,' dwelling in the soul of each of us (*Quod Det.*, 22). This indwelling Man he identifies with the heavenly Man, made in the image of God, whom he took to be referred to in Gen. i. 26-7; and this heavenly Man, he says, is not the creature of God (like the man referred to in Gen. ii. 7), but His offspring (*Leg. All.*, I. 31-2). Writing in a more popular strain, he says of the Hebrew nation (God's chosen race) that 'their bodies were moulded of human seeds (*spermata*), but their souls of divine; wherefore they have become kinsfolk of God' (*Vit. Mos.*, I. 279). In the *Book of Baruch* attributed to the Gnostic Justin, man is the progeny of Elohim (God) and Edem (or Earth). His 'soul' comes from Edem, his 'spirit' from Elohim; and it is the spirit, the divine principle in man, that is ultimately to be redeemed (Hippolytus, *Philosophumena*, V. 26-8). In a document attributed to the Gnostic sect of Naassenes God is said to have sown seeds (*spermata*) into the world, through which the whole world is being brought to perfection. The 'perfect Gnostics' are those who receive these seeds (Hipp., *op. cit.*, V. 8. 112-13). The Christian Gnostic Valentinus produced an elaborate myth of the beginning of things. In the course of it he relates how the material universe, including the human body with its animal 'soul,' was made by the Demiurge, or heavenly Craftsman, out of the lower elements; but divine Wisdom, unknown to him, inserted into some men the 'spiritual seed' (*sperma*), also called the 'seed of Achamoth' (Wisdom). Thus there are among men good souls and evil souls. The former are those which are 'receptive of the seed.' The function of Jesus as Saviour is to open a way for the 'seeds' (i.e. the divine element in man) into the Pleroma or celestial society; and final salvation comes 'when the seeds of God have been gathered together' (Irenaeus,

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Adv. Haer. [ed. Harvey], I. 1. 10, 12-13; Clement, *Excerpta ex Theodoto*, 38, 40, 49, 53).

It is difficult not to suppose that there is some relation between Valentinus's doctrine of the divine 'seed' which resides in good souls, and our author's doctrine of the 'seed.' It is no wild hypothesis that the heretical teachers here in view, like Philo before them and Valentinus after them, referred to the divine principle immanent in man, as the divine 'seed'; and our author may well have taken over the word from their vocabulary (as he may have taken over the term 'chrism'; see ii. 27, note). It seems therefore best to read, 'Anyone who is born of God does not commit sin, for a divine seed remains in him; and he cannot sin, because he is born of God'; which gives a (formal) parallel to the doctrine of Valentinus, that 'some souls are by nature good, and others by nature bad, and the good are those which are receptive of the Seed, but the bad by nature could never even receive that Seed' (Irenaeus, *op. cit.*, I. 1. 15).

It does not, of course, follow that our author shared the 'Gnostic' metaphysics; for his thought, however influenced by Hellenistic ideas, is rooted in the authentic Christian tradition. In that tradition, regeneration is closely associated with the Word of God. In Jas. i. 18 divine generation is 'by the word of the truth.' In 1 Pet. i. 23-25 we are said to be born anew of immortal, not of mortal, seed by the living, lasting word of God, which is further identified with the word of the Gospel. In the Fourth Gospel it is by receiving the (now personified) Word that men become children of God (John i. 12). It is noteworthy that the Naassene writer cited above finds scriptural sanction for his doctrine of the divine 'seeds' in the Parable of the Sower. In the Gospels themselves the seed in that parable is said to stand for the preached Word (Luke viii. 11). There is therefore a fairly well established association of the ideas 'seed' and 'word,' which in Hellenistic Christian circles might well be helped by the Stoic doctrine of the 'spermatic' or seminal *logos*, even though the Stoic *logos* is not a 'word.' In the light of all this, it would seem natural to suppose that when our author speaks of divine 'seed' he is thinking of the Word of God, or

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the Gospel. And this is confirmed by the observation that, just as he speaks here of the 'seed' remaining in believers, so in ii. 24 he speaks of the original Gospel (**that which you heard from the very beginning**) as remaining in them. As therefore, from one point of view, the Gospel is the 'chrism'—that is to say, it is that which when received and retained initiates the believer into the knowledge of God (ii. 27, note)—so from another point of view the Gospel, as the Word of God, is the immanent divine principle producing in men the regenerate nature which does not sin. It was by receiving the Gospel that we became children of God; it is by loyalty to the Gospel that we continue to live as His children, and conduct ourselves in a manner worthy of our divine parentage.

The teaching of this passage raises a difficulty when it is compared with other parts of the epistle. In i. 8-10 the writer has repudiated in the strongest terms the suggestion that anyone may claim to be sinless. Yet here he says, **Anyone who is born of God does not commit sin**. In ii. 1-2 he contemplates the case of a Christian who commits sin, and assures him that there is a remedy. Yet here he declares that the child of God **cannot sin**.

The difficulty may be relieved by observing a distinction of tenses in the Greek. The so-called present (more properly imperfect) and aorist tenses in Greek do not (except in the indicative mood) express a difference in the *time* of action, but in the '*mode* of action.' The imperfect forms of the oblique moods (including infinitive and participle) express continuous or habitual action; the aorist forms express momentary or occasional action. Now, in ii. 1 the verbs translated '**may not sin**' and '**does sin**' are in the aorist, and indicate single or occasional acts of sin. In iii. 4-10 the relevant verbs are uniformly in the present or imperfect tense: in particular, the expression **anyone who sins** in verse 6 represents an imperfect participle, and the infinite in the expression **cannot sin** is an imperfect infinitive. These expressions therefore should properly refer, not to single or occasional acts of sin, but to

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habitual sin, or a continuous sinful state. The meaning might be brought out by exaggerating the force of the tenses in translation: 'Anyone who keeps on sinning has never seen Him and does not know Him'; 'He cannot keep on sinning, because he has been born of God.' (The aorist participle and infinitive respectively would have meant, 'anyone who commits a sin' and 'he cannot commit a sin'.) If therefore we interpret the tenses strictly, we may understand the author not to affirm that the Christian cannot possibly commit a sin, but to say that it is impossible to conceive of a child of God being habitually sinful, while it remains possible (ii. 1) for him to fall, once and again, into a single act of sin (though he ought not to do so). In other words, the renewal of our nature consequent upon accepting the Gospel is such that our whole bent is away from sin, and our normal condition one of sinlessness. It may happen that, under stress of temptation, we commit a sinful act; in that case we make our peace with God by virtue of the sacrifice and intercession of Christ, and revert to our normal condition of sinlessness. For, whatever happens, we are children of God, and sin is abnormal and unnatural to us. It cannot be that, while God's word remains in us, we should so belie our heavenly parentage as to be set in sinful courses.

All this is true. Yet it is legitimate to doubt whether the reader could be expected to grasp so subtle a doctrine simply upon the basis of a precise distinction of tenses without further guidance. Moreover, it is not clear that this distinction of tenses is carried right through with the precision which would be necessary if the whole weight of the argument rested upon it. If we are to insist pedantically upon grammatical points, it is difficult to draw a sharp distinction between the statement **Anyone who remains in Him does not sin** (iii. 6, continuous present), and the statement in i. 8, which is literally, 'We do not possess sin' (also continuous present). Logically, it is not clear why a person of whom the former statement is true should not make the latter statement about himself. Yet the former is affirmed, the latter denied.

Moreover, while the statement (roundly made) that a Christian does not and cannot sin is strange to us, there did exist in

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early days a quite serious expectation that Christians should be actually sinless. This was due, not only to the 'perfectionism' which has often been observed to accompany revival fervour, but also to dogmatic prepossessions. In the eschatology which Christianity inherited from Judaism it was taught that in the Age to Come the people of God should be sinless. Thus in *Enoch* v. 8 sq. we read: 'Then too will wisdom be bestowed on the elect, and they will all live and never again sin, either through heedlessness or through pride' (Charles's translation; similarly *Jubilees* v. 12). As it was the general assumption of primitive Christianity that the Age to Come had actually been inaugurated (see pp. 34-7, above), the belief was natural that this, like other prophecies, was fulfilled in the Church. We may suppose that in the fervour of the early days the actual moral renewal that took place in many lives seemed almost to justify the belief: relatively and by comparison at least, converts *were* free from sin. Since this belief was widely held, the readers of the epistle would be likely to understand the writer to be affirming it, without observing too narrowly his use of tenses. Nor is it unlikely that he himself, deeply influenced by popular eschatology as he shows himself to be, shared the belief, when he was thinking theoretically or ideally, rather than looking at the facts.

The apparent contradiction is probably not to be eliminated (though it may be qualified) by grammatical subtlety. In i. 8-ii. 2 on the one hand, and in iii. 4-10 on the other, the author is writing from different points of view, and concerning himself with different problems. The heretical teaching might have different effects upon its adherents. Some of them were led to assume that, being 'enlightened,' they were already perfect in virtue. Others thought it did not matter whether they were virtuous or not, provided they were 'enlightened.' The complacency of the former was castigated in i. 8-10. The moral indifference of the latter is in view in our present passage. In combatting it, the author uses all the resources of antithesis to set forth the essential polarity of ethical religion. God and the devil, children of God and children of the devil, doing right and doing wrong—these represent absolute con-

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traries. To be born of God, to belong to God, to remain in God, to have His word in us, and to do right—these all stand on the one side of a dividing line: there is no alternative but to do wrong, and so to belong to the devil and to show oneself his child. To claim to be a child of God, and yet to be indifferent to moral obligations, is to confuse the whole issue. Of the personal problem raised for one who acknowledges all this, and yet is conscious of sin, he is not at this moment thinking. He is concerned to establish the one fundamental point. When he is facing the facts of personal experience, he is well aware that the pattern of life is not such a perfect chess-board, with its black and white separated by rigid lines. The actual and the ideal do not coincide. Nevertheless, it may be by contemplating the ideal that we best understand the final truth of things which underlies the actual.

The last clause of verse 10 forms a transition to a fresh aspect of the theme. In the author's manner it both carries on the thought of the preceding verses and introduces the idea which is to be the main theme of the verses which follow. He has been speaking of 'righteousness' and 'sin.' He now makes it clear that the specifically Christian form of righteousness is love, or charity, and the lack or denial of charity is, more than anything else, what Christianity means by sin.

2. LOVE AND HATRED; LIFE AND DEATH (iii. 11-18)

For this is the message you have learned from the very beginning, that we are to love one another: we are not to be like 12 Cain, who belonged to the evil One and slew his brother. And why did he slay him? Because his own deeds were evil and his brother's just. Do not wonder, brothers, that the 13 world hates you. We know we have crossed from death to 14 life, because we love the brotherhood; he who has no love for his brother remains in death. Anyone who hates his 15 brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life remaining within him. We know what love 16 is by this, that He laid down His life for us; so we ought to lay down our lives for the brotherhood. But whoever 17

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possesses this world's goods, and notices his brother in need, and shuts his heart against him, how can love to God
18 remain in him? Dear children, let us put our love not into words or into talk but into deeds, and make it real.

We have already been told that Christ's new command of
11 love, or charity, is an essential part of the original Gospel—an old command which you had from the very beginning (ii. 7). The writer now reiterates this, with the intention of enforcing and illustrating his thesis that right conduct is the only sure and sufficient mark of the child of God. For in a Christian valuation love and hatred are the typical forms of righteousness and
12 sin respectively. There is an example of unnatural and horrible hatred between brothers in the biblical story of Cain and Abel (our author's one and only explicit reference to the Old Testament). The precise pertinence of this illustration is indicated in 14b-15. But meanwhile, by a swift transition of thought, the two primeval brothers become representatives of the evil world over against the family of God. As Cain hated Abel to the point of killing him, because his own deeds were evil and
13 his brother's righteous, so the pagan world hates Christians, and for the same reason; because of the inherent opposition of wickedness to goodness. Thus the pagan world-order reveals
14 itself as a realm of hatred and of death. Christians on the contrary dwell in a realm of life, whose distinguishing mark is the love that exists among God's children in His family. Thus the ethical criterion for 'religious experience,' upon which the writer has insisted again and again, is made quite precise, and grounded firmly in fundamental principles. Charity is the touchstone. The decisive test for all such claims as those which are reviewed in i. 5 - ii. 7 lies in our attitude to our fellow men, and this test is one that we can all apply with less risk of self-deception than any other. The decisiveness of the test is further emphasized negatively: he who has no love for his
15 brother remains in death; for hatred is murder; murder is the denial of life: no murderer has eternal life remaining in him.

The thought of these verses is highly compressed, with abrupt transitions. The connection of ideas may profitably be

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studied with reference to a passage in the Fourth Gospel, which was probably in the author's mind. In John viii. 37-47 we have a scene described in which the Jews of Jerusalem (prototypes of the world which hates the righteous in our present passage) exhibit furious hostility to Jesus, culminating (viii. 59) in an attempt to kill Him by stoning. They claim to be Abraham's children, and as such to have one father, even God. Jesus retorts, If you are Abraham's children, then do as Abraham did ; but now you want to kill me. . . . Abraham did not do that. . . . If God were your father, you would love me. . . . You belong to your father the devil, and you want to do what your father desires; he was a *murderer* (the same word as in 1 John iii. 15, though Moffatt translates it differently) from the very beginning. Here we can recognize parallels to several of the leading ideas of our present passage: the Son of God over against the children of the devil; love for God's Son as a mark of the child of God; murderous hatred as a mark of the child of the devil; but here the reference to murder is natural and unforced, for the Jews are in the act of attempting to murder Jesus, thus giving overt proof of their descent from that primeval murderer, the devil. With this passage as background it is easier to understand the somewhat abrupt introduction of the idea of murder in 1 John iii. 12-15. For although we have the authority of Matt. v. 21-2 for treating hatred as constructive murder, yet there is nothing in the context itself to prepare for this particular turn of thought.

It is, however, a fruitful turn of thought, for it enables the writer to bring out very effectively a fresh aspect of the contrast of the two orders—the pagan world and the Christian dispensation—which he has already drawn in ii. 7-11. There the contrast was drawn mainly in terms of light and darkness, and light and darkness were correlated with love and hatred. Here the contrast is drawn in terms of life and death; and hatred is shown to belong to the realm of death just because hatred is murder, the denial of life. By contrast, love is the mark of the realm of life. The transition from the one realm to the other (it is implied) is that birth, or rebirth, by which we become children of God, and love between brothers is at

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once the mark of the child of God and the proof of eternal life.

Hatred, then, is sufficiently characterized as murder, or the negation of life. But how are we to characterize love positively? 16 For the Christian there is one inevitable answer. **We know what love is by this, that He laid down His life for us.** The language is that of the Fourth Gospel (cf. John x. 11-18, xv. 13), but the fact is affirmed in every part of the New Testament (see Mark x. 45, Gal. i. 4, Titus ii. 14, Heb. x. 8-10, 1 Pet. iii. 18, etc.), belonging indeed to the central core of the original *kerygma* or apostolic proclamation. Indeed, among the solid facts of the Gospel history, attested by direct evidence of the senses (**what we heard, what we saw with our eyes, what we witnessed and touched with our own hands**) one of the most securely attested is the fact that Jesus went willingly to death at the hands of His enemies, having a few hours earlier plainly declared by solemn acts and words that He dedicated Himself to death as a sacrifice on behalf of men whom it was His mission to save (1 Cor. xi. 23-5, Mark xiv. 22-4). The interpretation of the saving efficacy of the death of Christ is a task which Christian theology has never yet brought to a completely satisfactory conclusion. Already within the New Testament there are pointers to various lines of interpretation. But that in thus dying He showed, not only a martyr's devotion to a cause, but also a divine charity towards men who had sinned deeply against Him and against God, is a point upon which there is substantial agreement among New Testament writers who otherwise differ considerably in outlook (see Rom. v. 8, Gal. ii. 20, Rev. i. 5; and, by implication, Luke xxiii. 34, Heb. ii. 10-18, 1 Pet. ii. 21-5). It is one of the dominant ideas of the Fourth Evangelist, and he more than any of the others insists upon the point which is essential to any acceptable *theologia crucis*, that the love of Jesus—that is, the loyalty and devotion to His friends, the magnanimity towards His enemies, and the goodwill towards all men, in which He died—is indistinguishably one with the love of the eternal God towards His creatures, which is their only hope and assurance of eternal life (John xiii. 1-4, xv. 13-14, xvii. 19,

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x. 11-18, 27-30, iii. 16, etc.). This is the position assumed by our author here and elsewhere. At this point he refers to it for the sake of the consequences that follow for Christian ethics.

It was an immense strength to early Christianity as a system of ethical teaching that its regulative principle was expressed in a term—*agapé*, love or charity—which it was free to define afresh for itself (see pp. 110-12); and that the content of *agapé* was supplied, from the outset, by reference to the concrete action of Jesus Christ upon the field of history, conceived as an expression of the eternal will of God. Thus in explaining what sort of action is intended by the commandment, 'Love one another,' the Christian teacher has neither to fall back upon some speculative, *a priori*, conception of the love of God, nor to become involved in the discrimination of various kinds of 'love' among the chaotic manifestations of human affections and impulses. It is strictly true, in the history of thought and language, that we know what *agapé* means from the fact that Christ laid down His life for us.

The practice of love, or charity, therefore, can be broadly described in terms of the imitation of Christ. It is clear that from the outset the 'law of Christ' (Gal. vi. 2), by which Christians are bound to direct their conduct, was defined in the Church's teaching, not only by the traditional precepts of Jesus, but also by His example. The appeal to His example is explicit in 1 Cor. xi. 1, 1 Thess. i. 6, 2 Cor. viii. 9, x. 1, Rom. xv. 2-3, Phil. ii. 2-8, 1 Tim. vi. 13, 1 Pet. ii. 21, Heb. xii. 3-4; and it is probable that the idea of the *imitatio Christi* had more to say than is commonly recognized by critics, in the selection of incidents from the life of Jesus for record in the Gospels. In the Fourth Gospel there is one incident—the washing of the disciples' feet—which is expressly held up as an example to be followed by Christians in their dealings with one another (John xiii. 12-15); and this is shortly followed by the 'new commandment' which is so emphasized in this epistle: as I have loved you, you are to love one another (John xiii. 34). That means, says our author, that we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers (it seems a pity to substitute, as the

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Moffatt translation does, the less simple and concrete expression, the brotherhood). There were occasions in the life of the early Church, as there are certainly tragic occasions at the present day, for a quite literal obedience to this precept. But not all life is tragic; and yet the same principle of conduct must 17 apply all through. Thus it may call for the simple expenditure of money we might have spent upon ourselves, to relieve the need of someone poorer. It is after all the same principle of action, though at a lower level of intensity: it is the willingness to surrender that which has value for our own life, to enrich the life of another. If such a minimal response to the law of charity, called for by such an everyday situation, is absent, then it is idle to pretend that we are within the family of God, the realm in which love is operative as the principle and the token of eternal life.

The reader may be conscious of a certain descent from the sublimity of verse 16 to the apparent banality of verse 17. But this is characteristic of our author. As he was concerned to show (in iii. 4-7) that the terms 'righteousness' and 'sin' are to be understood realistically, as the plain man understands them—'righteousness' as doing right, 'sin' as doing wrong—so he is now concerned to say that Christian charity or love is not to be defined in any artificial or arbitrary sense. It means practical benevolence and beneficence. It may rise to a height of self-sacrifice comparable with the sacrifice of Christ, or it may mean that where another man is in want of necessities of life which you possess, you will give him what he needs. How easy, if the occasion for heroic self-sacrifice has not arisen, to pretend to ourselves that there is no call to 'lay down our lives'! But in any case there is the chance of helping someone at some slight cost to ourselves. No doubt charity means a good deal more than this; but in emphasizing that fact, the moralist is in danger of forgetting that it means at least this kind of thing. It is in any case concrete and realistic. This downright concreteness, almost crudity, in stating the moral requirements of religion, belongs to the genius of New Testament Christianity in general. It is noteworthy that in the Synoptic Gospels the abstract term 'love' scarcely occurs (only in Matt.

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xxiv. 12 and Luke xi. 42), and the command to love (except in citations from the Old Testament) rarely in set terms, and hardly ever without concrete exemplification. More often love, or charity, is commended by examples of loving or charitable action, as in Matt. xxv. 35-45, Luke x. 30-5, where the kind of action portrayed corresponds closely with the terms of verse 17. The fact is that Christianity derived this advantage from its origin among a people for whom religion was ethical, and morality was expressed in baldly concrete precepts. In rejecting a false legalism, and insisting upon the inwardness of true morality and religion, Christianity still demanded that the spirit of charity should embody itself in definite outward action. To over-spiritualize religion is to weaken it ethically. And so, our author concludes, whether the situation is tragic 18 or commonplace, let us put our love not into words or into talk, but into deeds, and make it real.

3. FELLOWSHIP WITH GOD (iii. 19-24)

Thus it is that we may be sure we belong to the truth and 19
reassure ourselves before Him whenever our heart may 20
condemn us; for God is greater than our heart, and He
knows all. If our heart does not condemn us, beloved, then 21
we have confidence in approaching God, and we get from 22
Him whatever we ask, because we obey His commands and
do what is pleasing in his sight. Now this is what He com- 23
mands, that we believe in the name of His Son Jesus Christ,
and love one another as He has commanded us to do; he 24
who obeys His commands remains within Him—and He
remains within him. And this is how we may be sure He
remains within us, by means of the spirit He has given us.

This short section consists of a series of loosely connected statements, set forth briefly and baldly, almost as if the author had made notes which he found no time to work up. Six distinct points are made (some of which reiterate what he had said already): (i) the exercise of charity is the sole and sufficient assurance of our Christian standing; (ii) if through scruples of conscience we lack this assurance, we may rest in God's complete

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knowledge of us; (iii) if the conscience is clear, then we may live a life of frank fellowship with God, in prayer and obedience to His commands; (iv) faith and charity are the sum of God's commands; (v) obedience to God is the self-authenticating form of mystical union; (iv) the gift of the Holy Spirit is the token of such union.

The closing sentence of this section would suggest (in view of his method elsewhere, e.g. ii. 29, iii. 10) that the author was proceeding to a direct treatment of the theme of the Holy Spirit; but he is led off into a digression in iv. 1-6, and then drops that theme in favour of a very important development of the theme of iii. 11-18. In iv. 13 he recurs for a moment to the theme of the Holy Spirit, but again drops it without further discussion. We never get the full treatment of the theme which iii. 24 would lead us to expect, for when it comes up again in v. 6-8 the treatment is allusive rather than explicit.

So far as the present section has a general theme it is that of the Christian's communion with God as his Father—an intercourse of prayer and obedience with One who knows him altogether, in whom he dwells, and who dwells in him through the gift of the Spirit.

Verses 19-20 are obscure and constitute a notorious *crux interpretum*. The varieties of reading offered by some later manuscripts seem to show that the difficulties which we feel were felt also in ancient times, and led to attempts to improve the text. The best manuscripts are to be followed, but they leave us in doubt about the punctuation and connection of clauses, about the construction of certain Greek particles,¹

¹ The particle *ὅτι* occurs twice. At its second occurrence it is clearly the conjunction meaning 'that' or 'because.' At its first occurrence it might be taken in the same way, with the following *ἐάν* as the hypothetical conjunction 'if.' In this case the second *ὅτι* is redundant, resuming the first, a slight irregularity which is not without parallel. But it is also possible that the first *ὅτι* is intended for the indefinite relative, 'whatever,' and *ἐάν* for the untranslatable particle *ἄν*. This latter alternative is assumed in the Moffatt translation (whenever being a legitimate and necessary paraphrase for a construction which cannot be translated directly). It has the advantage of avoiding any grammatical irregularity, though there is an undoubted clumsiness. The former alternative is perhaps simpler, and more in accord with the writer's general usage of these particles. It is impossible to decide between the alternatives on their merits. Either may be adopted as the general run of the passage seems to demand.

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and about the sense in which the word here translated **reassure** is to be understood.

To start with the last of these, the Greek verb *peithein* has three main uses: (i) to persuade someone to do something; (ii) to convince someone that such and such a thing is true; (iii) absolutely, to win a person over by persuasion, to 'talk him over,' as we say. The first sense is clearly not in place here. The second is possible, and we should look for a 'that' clause to follow. The third is also possible if we give to the verb the meaning, **reassure** (as Moffatt does); a quite possible extension of meaning, though one for which it is difficult to find an exact parallel.

Then there is the question of the connection of clauses; and first we must ask how the opening clause of verse 19 is to be related to the context. It runs, literally, 'By this we shall know that we are of the truth.' The form of expression is characteristic of this writer; cf. ii. 3, 5-6, iii. 10, 16, 24, iv. 2, 9, 10. Of these the closest in form to our present passage are ii. 3, ii. 5-6, and iii. 24. In each case the writer takes a proposition which might be regarded as disputable, or at least as lying beyond our certain knowledge, and then asserts that it is known to be true upon the ground of some fact attested by experience or observation. Thus (to give a literal rendering): 'By this we know that we know Him—if we keep His commandments'; 'By this we know that we are in Him—he who says he is in Him must walk as He walked'; 'By this we know that He remains in us—from the Spirit He has given us.' The keeping of the commandments, the imitation of Christ, and the possession of the Spirit are matters of experience, and they are the grounds of our knowledge of further truths. In each case the words **by this** refer to what follows.

If we are to be guided by this clue, the passage might be construed as follows: (A) 'By this we shall know that we are of the truth, and shall convince ourselves (of it) in His presence—namely, by the fact that, (even) if our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and knows all.' The clause 'we shall convince ourselves' is an expansion of the idea 'we shall know,' and the (second) 'that' clause refers back to the words 'by

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this.' The argument would then be something like this: The Christian believes himself to be living within the sphere of 'the truth.' This belief may be challenged, either from without or, more seriously, by doubts within the heart, since conscience may make us uneasy. How shall we deal with such doubts? We can only fall back upon the undoubted fact that God knows us far better than we know ourselves, and leave it to Him. A man's own heart (or 'consciousness') is not after all the final judge: God knows all. We might compare what Paul says in 1 Cor. iv. 4-5: **Although I am not conscious of having anything against me, that does not clear me . . . The hour of reckoning has still to come, when the Lord will come to bring dark secrets to the light; or, again, we might recall his repeated insistence that whether or not we know God, He knows us (1 Cor. viii. 2-3, xiii. 12, Gal. iv. 9).** If we adopt this exegesis, we must suppose that the writer, having set out to show that it is possible to be sure that we belong to the truth, draws back, lest he should seem to attribute infallibility to any human judgment. We can be sure of it only in the sense that we can be sure of God. But if this be his meaning, he has expressed himself obscurely, and the transition of thought is extremely abrupt.

It seems better therefore to suppose that in this case, contrary to his usual practice, the writer intends the words 'by this' to refer back to the foregoing verses. There is a parallel in iv. 6. He has there been considering how to distinguish true inspiration from false, and he sums up in conclusion, 'From this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error' (namely, by the tests just applied). Upon this analogy we might in the present passage understand the first clause of verse 19 to mean, 'By this (namely, by loving in deed and in truth) we shall know that we belong to the truth'; that is to say, an attitude of genuine charity towards our brothers, such as has just been described, is something concrete and recognizable in experience, and from it we may conclude that **we belong to the truth.** This gives a clear sense, and it is one which is in harmony with judgments expressed in other places of the epistle. We know that we know God, if we keep His

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commandments (ii. 3); we know that we are in Christ, if we imitate His conduct (ii. 5-6); the children of God are recognized by love to the brethren (iii. 10); we know that we have crossed from death to life because we love our brothers (iii. 14). And so here: we know that we belong to the truth because our love is in deed and not in word alone. There can be little doubt that this is the meaning intended, and it is represented by the Moffatt translation.

The following clauses therefore do not merely carry on the thought of 19a, but add something fresh to it. But in what sense? A respectable exegetical tradition, going back to the Greek Fathers, interprets these clauses as a warning: if our own consciences condemn us, much more will the Omniscient, to whom all our faults lie open, condemn us. The conjunction 'and' must then be understood in a virtually adversative sense, almost as if it were 'but' (parallels for this are not wanting). We should then understand the passage as follows: (B) 'By what I have said we may be sure that we belong to the truth. Nevertheless, we shall do well to convince ourselves¹ in His presence; that, if our own heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and knows all.' It is a warning against the complacency that may attend upon 'Christian assurance' (as the history of various movements in the Church can attest). The writer has been urging the necessity of absolute sincerity: he now backs up his plea by reminding his readers that they live in the sight of God, the Searcher of hearts. Such a warning would be in harmony with the severity of tone which makes itself heard in verses 3-8, 12, 15, 17. The demands here made for absolute purity and absolute sincerity in love might well arouse searchings of heart, and these searchings would gain penetration from the recollection that they can never exhaust the possibilities of evil in the human heart, evil which may elude our scrutiny, but cannot elude God's. The readers must not be allowed to come too readily to the conclusion that they love in deed and in truth, or that in other respects they are qualified to enjoy the assurance of 'belonging to the truth.'

¹ If the passage is so construed, it would be easier to read, with some inferior manuscripts, the subjunctive, 'let us convince,' rather than the future indicative of the best manuscripts.

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But in spite of the recurrent note of severity, it does not seem to be the intention of the passage as a whole to awaken a sense of sin which would amount almost to self-despair. Its main purport is that which is expressed in the words **We are children of God; we know that we have crossed from death to life because we love the brotherhood.** That is to say, the writer seems to assume that his readers are entitled to be sure that they belong to the truth, because (unlike the false teachers) they have a sincere love for the brotherhood. They are not indeed perfect. If we say, '**We are not guilty**' (he reminded them in i. 8-9), **we are deceiving ourselves.** But in the same breath he reassured them, **if we confess our sins, He is faithful and just, He forgives our sins.** And so here, having contemplated the possibility that our heart may condemn us, he adds the reassurance that God, who is faithful and just, whose children we are, 'knoweth our frame; He remembereth that we are dust' (Ps. ciii. 14).

The passage therefore may be understood as follows: (C1) 'By what I have said we may be sure that we belong to the truth, and reassure our heart in His presence, whenever our heart condemns us; because God is greater than our heart, and knows all'; or, alternatively (C2), 'By what I have said we may be sure that we belong to the truth; and we may convince ourselves in His presence that, (even) if our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and knows all.' There is little to choose between these two renderings. The former is substantially that of Moffatt. In either case the general sense is much the same.

²¹⁻
²² The writer now brings his readers back to what he must consider, in spite of all our imperfections, the normal state of the Christian life; the state in which we are not under the condemnation of conscience, and have no sense of sinful alienation from God. In this state we live in the free and happy intercourse of children with their Father: we ask Him for what we need, and do as He bids. The sequence of thought (or rather of experience) from verses 19-20 to verses 21-2 may be aptly illustrated from the *Conversations* of Brother Lawrence, who said 'that when he had failed in his duty, he only confessed

his fault, saying to God, "I shall never do otherwise, if You leave me to myself; 'tis You must hinder my falling, and mend what is amiss." That after that he gave himself no further uneasiness about it. That we ought to act with God in the greatest simplicity, speaking to Him frankly and plainly, and imploring His assistance in our affairs, just as they happen. That God never failed to grant it, as he had often experienced' (*The Practice of the Presence of God: Second Conversation*). Brother Lawrence's expression, 'to act with God in the greatest simplicity, speaking to Him frankly and plainly,' comes very near to our author's meaning in the words, **We have confidence in approaching God**; for the word rendered confidence stood in ancient Greece for the most valued right of a citizen in a free state, the right to 'speak his mind'; and although the meaning of the word became wider and vaguer in course of time, yet there always hangs about it this special association with the thought of freedom of speech, unhampered by fear or shame. In our relation to God such freedom of speech is not an inherent right, but is strictly dependent upon an equally frank and straightforward obedience to the divine will (verse 22).

The assurance that our requests to God will be granted upon this condition finds its justification (as is usual in this epistle) in statements of the Fourth Gospel. In John viii. 28-9 the unbroken communion with God which marked the earthly life of Jesus is grounded in His complete dependence upon, and unswerving obedience to, the Father. **I do nothing of my own accord, but speak as the Father has taught me. He who sent me is at my side; He has not left me alone; for I always do what pleases Him.** Living in this intimate communion, Jesus knows that His prayers are always heard (John xi. 22, 41-2). But, further, His own relation to the Father is archetypal of the relation into which He brings His followers. United with Him in faith, love and obedience, they too may be sure of having their prayers answered. **If you remain in me and my words remain in you, then ask whatever you like, and you shall have it. . . . As the Father has loved Me, so I have loved you; remain within My love. If you keep My commands you will remain**

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within my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands and remain within His love (John xv. 7, 9-10). The same thought is put in other words in xiv. 14-15: I will do whatever you ask me in my name. If you love me you will keep my commands; and in xvi. 26-7: On that day you will ask in my name, and I do not say to you that I will ask the Father on your behalf; for the Father loves you Himself, because you have loved me and believed that I came forth from God. To pray 'in the name' of Christ is to pray in virtue of our union with Him, and that union is one of love and obedience, in which Christ's love and obedience to the Father are reproduced in us through faith. This whole complex of ideas reappears in a slightly different form in the verses before us. Our requests to God are heard, because we obey His commands and (like Christ Himself, John 23 viii. 29), do what is pleasing in His sight. And what are those commands? First, that we should have faith in Christ (cf. John xvi. 27), and, secondly, as the proper manifestation of such faith, that we love one another as He has commanded us to do (cf. John xv. 12, following upon the assurance of answer to prayer in 7-10). That faith in Christ is a part of the service of God is taught in John vi. 29, while for the close association of faith and charity we may refer to Gal. v. 6: 'faith active in love' is a Pauline definition of the Christian 24a life which our author would readily have accepted. Finally, in simple obedience to the commands of God (of Christ) we recognize the reality of that intimate union between God and His children which is described as a mutual indwelling (cf., again, John xv. 7-10).

Verse 24b forms (once again after our author's manner) a transition from the theme of iii. 19-24a to that of iv. 1-6, which is an almost parenthetical section.

With the words *remains within Him*, we have been brought back to an idea which played a prominent part in earlier sections of the epistle. It was first introduced at ii. 6, where we saw reason to suspect an allusion to the misuse of 'mystical' language by the heretical teachers. Their claim to 'remain in' Christ—that is, to be in mystical union with Him—can be allowed only if they imitate His example. In the verses which

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follow, another expression is substituted: 'to remain in the light,' and the writer insists that to be in the light necessarily means to obey the command of love. The subject is then dropped for a time; but in ii. 24-9 we are brought back to it. Here we learn that the condition of 'remaining in the Son and the Father' is that the Word of God, or the 'chrism,' should remain in us. In other words, there is no union with God in Christ which is not conditioned by loyal adhesion to the Gospel, in which is included the 'new command' of love. Then the idea of 'indwelling' gives place to that of divine generation, and this in turn is brought into connection with the command of love. The thought is developed that the only sure proof by which we may know that we have been born into the life of God is to be found in our love for our brothers. And then, finally, the thought thus developed is linked with the earlier line of thought by recalling the language of 'indwelling': **He who obeys His commands remains within Him—and He remains within him (iii. 24a).** This is a virtual reassertion of what has already been said; but it is designed to lead up to the very profound and significant conclusion in iv. 7-12, where the doctrines of divine generation and divine indwelling are shown to be rooted in the conception of the divine nature as love, and consequently to involve by logical necessity the obligation of mutual love among those who are the objects of the love of God.

Meanwhile, however, the author is reminded that there is another aspect in which the new life in Christ can be represented (beside regeneration and the mutual indwelling of Christ and the believer)—namely, the possession of the Holy Spirit. This is a part of the primitive Gospel (**that which you learned from the very beginning**). In the speech of Peter at Pentecost, which is a kind of programme of the apostolic Preaching, the gift of the Spirit is an integral part of the **triumphs of God** (Acts ii. 11), by which the redemption of man has been effected: **This Jesus God raised, as we can all bear witness. Uplifted then by God's right hand, and receiving from the Father the long-promised Holy Spirit, He has poured on us what you now see and hear** (Acts ii. 32-3). In Paul the Spirit

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is represented as the mode of Christ's indwelling in the Church. In the Fourth Gospel the Spirit, conceived in fully personal terms as the Paraclete, is the abiding representative of Christ, in whom He Himself returns to His flock, to help, guide and enlighten them, and through them to reveal to the world the true nature of sin and righteousness and the reality of the divine judgment (John xvi. 7-15). It is remarkable that in this epistle there is little trace of the 'high' Pauline and Johannine doctrines of the Spirit. The thought is closer to the level of primitive Christianity, as it is represented in the Acts of the Apostles and inferred from allusions in the Pauline epistles. The Spirit is there primarily the spirit of prophecy—that is to say, an *afflatus*, or 'inspiration,' granted to certain individuals, 'prophets,' by which the truth of the Gospel is confirmed to those who hear (Acts v. 32; cf. 1 John v. 6). So here, the fact of the mutual indwelling of Christ and His people is confirmed by the gift of the Spirit, which is (as in Gal. iii. 2) a *datum* of experience from which an inference can be drawn. But since it is fatally easy to mistake a false 'inspiration' for the true, it is necessary to consider how the two are to be distinguished, and this leads to a digression in the verses which follow.

EXCURSUS ON INSPIRATION, TRUE AND FALSE (iv. 1-6)

iv.

- 1 Do not believe every spirit, beloved, but test the spirits to see if
they come from God; for many false prophets have emerged
- 2 in the world. You can recognize the Spirit of God by this: every
spirit which confesses Jesus as the Christ incarnate comes
- 3 from God, and every spirit which does not confess Jesus
incarnate does not come from God. This latter is the spirit
of antichrist; you were told it was coming, and here it is
- 4 already in the world. Dear children, you belong to God, and
you have conquered all such, for He who is within you is
greater than he who is in the world.
- 5 They belong to the world,
therefore they speak as inspired by the world,
and the world listens to them:

we belong to God—

he who knows God listens to us,

he who does not belong to God does not listen to us.

This is how we recognize the spirit of truth and the spirit of error.

This section presupposes that the Church still has experience, as in the time of Paul, of inspired prophetic utterance by its members. A study of 1 Cor. xiv. is a valuable preparation for understanding the situation here contemplated. That chapter has much to say of the extreme form of 'inspired' utterance known as 'speaking with tongues.' That phenomenon no longer plays a part here. But over against this irrational and unintelligible type of 'inspiration' Paul sets the rational and intelligible 'inspiration' of prophecy, by which the Church is instructed and 'built up' (1 Cor. xiv. 1-5). The actual effect of prophecy is vividly described in 1 Cor. xiv. 24-5: **If everybody prophesies, and some unbeliever or outsider comes in, he is exposed by all, brought to book by all; the secrets of his heart are brought to light, and so, falling on his face, he will worship God, declaring, 'God is really among you.'** Observe here the two functions of the Spirit of prophecy: to mediate divine judgment (as in John xvi. 8-11); and to demonstrate the reality of the divine presence in the Church (as iii. 24, above). Even prophecy, however, is not necessarily to be taken at its face value. It is subject to criticism. **Let only two or three prophets speak, while the rest exercise their judgment upon what is said** (1 Cor. xiv. 29). To what extraordinary lengths uncontrolled 'inspiration' might go is indicated by 1 Cor. xii. 3, where Paul contemplates the possibility of an 'inspired' person crying out, **'Cursed be Jesus!'** Such an utterance he would no doubt class with the irrational 'speaking with tongues.' A prophet would hardly be guilty of such an aberration, since **prophets can control their own prophetic spirits** (1 Cor. xiv. 32). But even prophecy is not always on the same level of truth or 'edification.'

We now turn to the situation contemplated in our epistle. The danger, always present, of a false inspiration has been

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realized. Many false prophets have emerged in the world (iv. 1), or, to translate more literally, have gone out into the world; have gone out, that is to say, from the Church and in its name (cf. 2 John 7 and note). They are the heretical teachers already referred to in ii. 18-19. They had been, nominally, members of the Church, but, says our author, they can never have been true members of the Church, else they would never have separated themselves from it (ii. 19). No; their spiritual home is the pagan world; the sources of their teaching are pagan; and for that reason they find ready acceptance in the pagan world (iv. 5). The description would fit the 'Gnostics' whose teachings we know, for we must conclude that in most of them the pagan element is their real basis, and the Christian element a comparatively ineffective appendage. Some of them (not all) no doubt intended, by 'reinterpreting' Christianity in 'Gnostic' terms, to commend the Gospel to the pagan world. Our evidence suggests that for a time their missionary activities made a wide appeal, and seriously rivalled those of orthodox Christianity, with its conservatism and intransigence in the face of the religious tendencies of the time. When our information becomes copious, towards the end of the second century, the Church is almost 'out of the wood,' but behind this appears to lie a period in which central or traditional Christianity had its back to the wall, and saw the increasing success of these compromising systems. That period is but faintly illuminated for us. We may take our present passage as representing an early stage in it.

The forerunners of second-century 'Gnosticism' have only just declared themselves, and left the Church. They appeared as prophets, speaking under inspiration. It may be suggested that much of the fantastic material of 'Gnostic' literature could well be understood as originating in the unbridled enthusiasm of 'inspired' men, who claimed special 'revelations' of the unseen world, such revelations having been later organized by a misplaced ingenuity into the elaborate systems known to us from Irenaeus and Hippolytus. Our author is confronted by this phenomenon: men speaking apparently under an inspiration as real as that of any Christian prophet, and yet proclaim-

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ing doctrines which he knew to be radically un-Christian. Whatever their claims to inspiration, he could not regard their teaching as other than 'of the world'—that is, pagan in essence; and their success with the pagan public he could only regard as proof of a fundamental affinity with paganism. And yet these men were prophets; they were 'inspired.' He could not deny it. Their utterances had all the familiar marks of 'inspiration.' No wonder simple-minded believers were impressed by them, and wavered in their convictions. How was the situation to be met?

For an answer to the problem, he goes back to the principle, long recognized, that prophecy is subject to criteria lying outside the mere fact of its 'inspired' character. 'Inspiration' as such is not a criterion of truth. **Do not believe every spirit, but 1** **test the spirits to see if they come from God,** for there is diabolical as well as divine inspiration. What then is the test? Paul had laid down the principle: **No one is speaking in the Spirit of God when he cries, 'Cursed be Jesus'; and no one can say, 'Jesus is Lord,' except in the holy Spirit (1 Cor. xii. 3).** But this criterion now needs to be made more precise, in the light of the developed theology of the Church (especially in its Johannine form). The heretics also might say, 'Jesus is Lord,' but they would not mean by it what the Church meant. To 2 confess Jesus as Lord, in the sense of the Church's faith, is to confess Him as the Son of God incarnate. Whatever else the heretics might affirm of Christ, they would not confess the reality of the Incarnation. By that test their teaching, however powerfully 'inspired,' was condemned. The spirit by which 3 they spoke was not the Spirit of God. It was the spirit of Antichrist (see ii. 18-19, and notes). As such, it represented the most deadly assault of the powers of evil against the Church of Christ—and an assault, let us remember, which at the time looked like succeeding, for the world listens to them (5). The readers therefore must be reminded of that assurance of victory over 'the world' (over the forces of paganism, and consequently over the insidious propaganda of paganism under Christian colours) which is, as they have already been told, an essential part of the Gospel (see ii. 12-14, and notes). All that

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4 they need to know is, **You belong to God**, and it follows, **You have conquered all such**, for **He who is within you is greater than he who is in the world** (i.e. the Evil One, v. 19). (All that is implied in the expressions **You belong to God** and **He is within you**, has already been set forth, and the readers are 5 expected to have it in mind). As for the success of the heretical propaganda, if **the world listens to them**, it is true on the other 6 hand that **he who knows God listens to us**. (The first personal pronoun plural here stands for the Church as a whole, speaking through its responsible teachers, who embody the authentic apostolical tradition.)

⁵⁻₆ The line is drawn, in the spirit of ii. 15-17, with the utmost sharpness. On the one side is the pagan world, including, as we now know, the heretical teachers with their semi-pagan doctrines. On the other side is the Church affirming the true faith. The antithesis is absolute: **they belong to the world, therefore they speak as inspired by the world, and the world listens to them: we belong to God—he who knows God listens to us; he who does not belong to God does not listen to us.**

If these words are taken in their strict literal sense, they would seem to imply that missions to the pagan world have no chance of success, since the 'world' lies wholly in the power of the Evil one (v. 19), and therefore does not belong to God, and cannot hear the word of God. The writer obviously does not mean that. He is speaking out of the experience of Christian missionaries and teachers. The Gospel is proclaimed broadcast. Some respond to it, as though they had a natural affinity with it. Others remain untouched, as though there was nothing in them to respond; or, worse still, they make an apparent response, and enter the Church, only to lend a ready ear to semi-pagan teaching, thereby proving that their affinity is with the 'world.' Before the message was heard, there was nothing to distinguish these two classes of persons. When they had heard it, the difference between them became manifest. If the question were asked, Why did A receive and B reject the same message, proclaimed to both in the same terms and under the same conditions? there seemed to be no answer except that they were that kind of people: A was

I JOHN, CHAPTER IV, VERSES 1-6

already a potential Christian (*'anima naturaliter Christiana'*); B was not.

There is a similar implication in those passages of the Fourth Gospel which speak of Christ's other sheep who have yet to be brought into His fold (x. 16), and of the scattered children of God whom Christ must gather in (xi. 52). The emphasis is different. The Evangelist has his eye upon people in the Gentile world, who, although outside the Jewish 'fold,' were within the scope of Christ's saving work just as much as those among whom He lived. That is to say, the statements are meant positively and inclusively, without attention to their negative and exclusive implications. Yet they do suggest that there are in the world people who are, so to speak, predestined Christians. But the very use of the term 'predestined' is a warning that we are approaching one of the irresolvable antinomies of human existence, the problem of 'fate, foreknowledge and freewill,' which the devils discussed in Pandemonium 'and found no end, in wandering mazes lost.' If the antithesis is stated absolutely, and understood as a metaphysical principle, then we fall into the Gnostic dualism, which held that certain souls were created from the first 'receptive of the Seed,' and others not (see notes on iii. 9. Upon our author's attitude to this dualism, see notes on ii. 15-18).

It must be admitted that he has expressed himself somewhat incautiously; but he is not intending precise philosophical statement, and should not be held committed to the apparently logical implications of what he says. He has his eye upon the actual situation. Empirically, it is true that there is a diversity in the response of different people to the Word of God, which cannot be explained beyond saying that they are that kind of people. Many centuries of experience have taught us that a negative response may often be due to a defect in the preacher's presentation of the message, or to his failure to understand sympathetically the people to whom he appeals. Not all heresy and unbelief are exhibitions of a radical affinity with 'the world,' or hostility to God. Yet, when all allowance is made, there is here a mystery beyond our understanding. Even as proclaimed by our Lord Himself, the Gospel was 'hidden

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from the wise and prudent and revealed to babes' (Matt. xi. 25), and in spite of all complications and obfuscations, men do come face to face with the truth, and, for ultimate reasons which we cannot penetrate, range themselves by their response to it.

Our author's immediate intention, however, is not to deal with this mystery. It is to reassure those who are perturbed by the success of semi-pagan teaching. That success was only to be expected in a world like this. But it is limited by the fact that God has those who belong to Him, and *they* cannot be misled. And since He is greater than *he who is in the world*, the final victory must lie with Him. To this we may surely add that this victory must involve the salvation of the world itself (ii. 2, iv. 14), and so, in some way beyond our understanding, the salvation of those who belong to the world, and appear at present as irredeemable enemies of the truth.

- 6b Verse 6b sums up the purport of the section. The word *this* clearly refers (contrary to the author's usual practice) to what precedes. The reference is not to the immediately preceding sentence taken alone, but to the section as a whole. It deals with the problem of 'inspired' utterances which convey false doctrine. Such inspiration, it is assumed, is diabolical and not divine, and the test by which true inspiration may be distinguished from false is the conformity of its deliverances with the fundamental faith of the Church, set forth by its responsible teachers. It is interesting to recall a somewhat similar treatment of the problem of false prophecy in the Old Testament. Several of the greater prophets are troubled by the appearance of men whose inspiration is superficially similar to their own, while their influence upon the people is disastrous. In Deut. xiii. 1-5 the case is contemplated of a prophet who attempts to lead the people into idolatry, and it is laid down that even though his word should be confirmed by signs and wonders, he is to be rejected. (We may fairly conjecture that such cases had occurred.) This affords a real parallel to the treatment of the matter in the passage before us. The fundamental doctrine of Judaism is monotheism; no utterance, however inspired, which contradicts the principle of monotheism can be accepted

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as true prophecy. The fundamental doctrine of Christianity is the Incarnation; no utterance, however inspired, which denies the reality of the Incarnation, can be accepted by Christians as true prophecy. Both religions recognize the freedom of the Spirit, and both owe something of their essential character to its exercise. But both of necessity draw a line beyond which such freedom is restrained by the demands of some fundamental truth.

In order to appreciate the significance of the passage before us, it will be well to consider further the history of prophecy in the Christian Church. In the early Church, as we know it from the Pauline epistles and the Acts of the Apostles, great store was set upon what are called 'spiritual gifts,' among which Paul includes both moral and spiritual qualities like knowledge, wisdom and faith, and what we may describe by contrast as abnormal phenomena, like spiritual healing, prophecy and speaking with tongues. Among the abnormal gifts he recognizes prophecy as having the greatest value for the building up of the life of the Church. (1 Cor. xii. 8-11, xiv. 1-5). He also places prophets along with apostles and teachers as persons specially endowed for the ministry of the Church (1 Cor. xii. 28, Eph. iv. 11). All this careful distinction and grading of spiritual gifts is, so far as we know, part of Paul's personal contribution to the doctrine of the Spirit and the Church. At the beginning, to judge from the report in Acts, the outpouring of the Spirit was regarded as the normal accompaniment of baptism into the Christian Church, and the various 'spiritual gifts' might manifest themselves indiscriminately in the same or in different persons. The apostles in particular possessed not only that peculiar 'grace' of apostleship which Paul distinguishes from other gifts (Rom. i. 5), but also the gifts of healing and of speaking with tongues, and (we may assume though it is not directly stated) of prophetic utterance. That which distinguished the Twelve from other persons to whom inspiration is attributed (such as Stephen and his colleagues, Acts vi. 3, 5, vii. 55) was not so much any

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peculiarity in spiritual endowment as their qualification to witness to the Gospel facts (Acts i. 21-2).

During the whole of the apostolic age inspired utterance, having the direct and enthusiastic quality associated with Old Testament prophecy, played an important part in forming and guiding the life and thought of the Church, and its importance outlasted that of the other 'abnormal' gifts. But in the course of the second century we find prophecy taking more and more a subordinate position. The attempt at a prophetic revival known as Montanism failed to win the support of the Church at large, and its failure served further to depreciate that type of inspiration. It is thus certain that prophecy declined (whether for good or ill) between the apostolic age and the close of the second century. The stages in that decline are not all clear. The passage with which we are dealing may throw some light upon it. It implies that spiritual gifts, and in particular prophecy, are still a part of the living experience of the Church, but its effect is to establish a somewhat drastic control of the freedom of prophetic utterance, by the standard of a rule of faith, and by the authority of an acknowledged ministry.

It is to be remembered that from the beginning Christianity was not to be defined exclusively as a 'religion of the Spirit.' Prophets had an important rôle, but they were subordinate to apostles: 'First apostles, then prophets' is the order (1 Cor. xii. 28, and so in all relevant passages). Though the clarification of the position may be due to Paul, it is clear that, from the first, prophets who were not also apostles were in some sense subordinate to the Twelve. This was not because their spiritual endowment was inferior, but because the apostles possessed a peculiar qualification which could not be shared by others. They were the primary witnesses to the evangelical facts by which the Church was constituted. Thus prophecy was never fully autonomous, nor were prophets ever exempt from criticism by virtue of their inspiration. In the earliest extant Christian writing, Paul both affirms the value of prophecy and prescribes criticism of its deliverances: **Never quench the fire of the Spirit; never disdain prophetic revelations, but test them all,**

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retaining what is good, and abstaining from whatever kind is evil (1 Thess. v. 19-21). The criterion which he recommended, as we have seen, is conformity with the fundamental Christian affirmation 'Jesus is Lord.' Behind that affirmation lies the total content of the Gospel, which in the last resort rests upon the apostolic testimony. In a Pauline formula, the Church is built upon the twofold foundation of apostles and prophets (Eph. ii. 20), the apostles representing the authority of primary witness to the Gospel facts, while prophets represent the living guidance of the Spirit by which the facts were apprehended in ever fuller meaning and scope.

There was, however, always the possibility of tension between the spontaneity of prophecy and the principle of authority embodied in the apostolic witness to the Gospel. That tension revealed itself when persons who had secured recognition as prophets put forth teaching which was opposed to fundamental elements in the evangelical tradition. Such is the situation contemplated in this epistle. It was one of extreme danger to the Church. The freedom of the Spirit was the life-blood of Christianity, and yet that freedom was being used to disintegrate the life of the Church. In fact, one side of the twofold foundation upon which the Church was built was crumbling. In face of this danger the writer falls back upon the other side, the apostolic witness to the evangelical facts—**what we heard, what we saw with our eyes, what we witnessed and touched with our own hands** (i. 1), **the word which you heard** (ii. 7), **that which you learned from the very beginning** (ii. 24). From the first the apostolic Gospel, which brought the life of the Church into being, was prior to prophecy, in which that life found expression. That priority now becomes of direct practical importance. The writer has no wish to see prophecy suppressed or discredited. On the contrary, he would secure the value of prophecy in the Church by distinguishing true inspiration from false. In a situation of almost desperate gravity it was a matter of life and death to establish the principle that 'inspiration' does not in itself provide a guarantee of truth. A man may possess an exalted sense of direct guidance and enlightenment by the Spirit of God, and

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the freedom and enthusiasm with which he speaks may persuade his hearers that he is indeed one of those whom 'God whispers in the ear'; and yet it may all have nothing to do with genuine Christianity. That alone is Christian which coheres, intellectually and morally, with the fundamental facts of the Gospel; and those facts we know, in the last resort, only through the witness of the apostles, transmitted to us by such channels as are available.

Here we have the basis of that appeal to apostolic testimony which was powerfully developed by Christian teachers of the second century in the conflict with 'Gnostic' heresy, and led to the safeguarding of the tradition by the threefold defence of the Creed, the succession of the Ministry and the Canon of the New Testament. The history of the Church shows that this appeal to tradition could work in the direction of a sterile institutionalism, robbing the Church of the freedom of the Spirit which is its birthright: it shows also that enthusiasm, mystical experience, assurance of special guidance, and all the marks of inspiration, may be associated with doctrines subversive of the Gospel. The tension between authority and freedom, between tradition and inspiration, cannot safely be resolved either by the repudiation of authority or by the repression of inspiration. The Church fares best when apostle and prophet stand together as the firm foundation of its life.

4. THE LOVE OF GOD (iv. 7-12)

- 7 Beloved, let us love one another, for love belongs to God, and
8 everyone who loves is born of God and knows God; he who
9 does not love, does not know God, for God is love. This is
how the love of God has appeared for us, by God sending
His only Son into the world, so that by Him we might
10 live. Love lies in this, not in our love for Him, but in His
love for us—in the sending of His Son to be the propitiation
11 for our sins. Beloved, if God had such love for us, we
12 ought to love one another. God no one has ever seen; but
if we love one another, then God remains within us,
and love for Him is complete in us.

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Verses 1-6 have been in the nature of a parenthesis, dictated by the necessity of removing any possible misunderstanding of the appeal to the witness of the Spirit in iv. 24. We now return to the main theme.

The position has already been established that any real relation to God—whether we express it as ‘knowing God,’ or as ‘remaining in Him,’ or as being ‘born of God’—involves obedience to His commands; and that His supreme and all-inclusive command is **that we love one another**. All this is ⁷ now succinctly expressed in the words, **Let us love one another, for love belongs to God, and everyone who loves is born of God, and knows God; he who does not love, does not know God**. Then the writer adds a theological statement of the utmost ⁸ importance, which provides the final justification for the teaching he has given: **for God is love**.

In its form, this statement might appear to identify God with an abstract principle, and so to imply an impersonal conception of Deity (the same might be said of his other statement, **God is light** (i. 5)). But it is clear that this is not the writer’s intention; for in the context he speaks of the love of **God**, and says that love belongs to God, and that **God had love for us**. God therefore is presented as the personal Subject of the act of loving. Yet the proposition, **God is love**, is clearly intended to go further than the proposition ‘God loves us.’ What is its meaning?

Christianity always presupposes the Hebrew conception of Deity as the ‘living God.’ In the Old Testament there is little or no speculation about the nature of God as He is in Himself. He is known to men in His actions as the Creator of the world, Ruler of mankind, and the King and Saviour of His people. History is the field of His self-revelation, and communion with Him is conditioned by obedience to His commands. Accordingly, the Word of God is not primarily the communication of knowledge about the divine nature; it is active energy by which the world was made and is sustained, and by which men are called into active fellowship with God in carrying out His purpose. If therefore we ask what God is, the answer must be given in terms of what He does. He creates and sustains the

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universe; He judges the world in righteousness; He succours men in distress; He guides those who submit to His will; He forgives the repentant; and the like. Now Christianity takes over this Hebrew conception of the 'living God.' It is implied in the Gospel teaching about the Kingdom of God; for the idea of the Kingdom of God is essentially dynamic, not static. The Kingdom is something that *comes*, as an event in history. Its coming means that God has acted, for the fulfilment of His purpose. The Kingdom of God came with Christ. Consequently the character of His action is to be discovered from the life, teaching, sufferings, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. If this is to be put in terms of the 'Word of God' (as defined in the Old Testament), it may be expressed in the proposition that 'the Word was made flesh' in Jesus Christ.

What, then, is God's 'word' to men? Or, to put the same question in another form, What is the character of that divine action which is the coming of His Kingdom? The answer given in the Fourth Gospel is: **God loved the world so dearly that He gave up His only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him may have eternal life, instead of perishing** (John iii. 16; a passage obviously alluded to in our present passage, verse 9). The Word of God to men is love; the coming of His Kingdom is an act of love. Hence, if we ask, What is God's nature? the answer must be given in terms of love.

Over against the Hebrew conception of the 'living God' we may set the highly abstract conception of Deity which is characteristic of much Greek thought. Here the term 'God' stands for absolute Being, timeless, changeless, unmoved, and best described by negation of all that belongs to our sensible experience of the world. But in the period to which the Johannine writings belong some Hellenistic thinkers were feeling after a less abstract conception. Thus a writer in the Hermetic Corpus uses the argument that the universe implies the existence of a Creator, whose 'essence' is just the fact that He creates. 'And if you compel me to speak more boldly, it is His essence to produce and create all things. And just as it is impossible for anything to exist without a maker, so it is impossible for the Creator to exist without perpetually making

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everything' (*Corp. Herm.*, V. 9). Another says, 'As man cannot live without life, so God cannot live without making what is good. For it is this that is God's life, as it were; His movement, as it were; to cause all things to move and live' (*Corp. Herm.*, XI. 17). The tendency of such thought is towards the position that if you can describe God's characteristic activity, as, for instance, that of creating the world, or of giving life, or of originating goodness, you may at once transfer this to the definition of His Being, since 'being self-operating He always exists in His work' (*Corp. Herm.*, XI. 14). Thus, you can say, 'This is life; this is the beautiful; this is the Good; this is God' (*Corp. Herm.*, XI. 13).

Such attempts to define the divine nature no longer confine the idea of God to that of abstract Being. Whether or not this movement in Hellenistic thought was stimulated by contact with Judaism, it clearly comes nearer to the Hebraic strain in both Judaism and Christianity; but it stops short of ascribing personality to God, and makes God and the world mutually dependent in a way strange to Hebrew and Christian thought.

As we have seen, the writer of this epistle shows several signs of contact with Hellenistic religious thought. It is therefore permissible to understand his doctrine that **God is love** from the kind of teaching just referred to. If we say that God must be defined in terms of His characteristic activity—as life, because His activity is manifested in the life of created beings, or as the Good, because all good is His work—then the Christian, who believes that God loved the world, may define God as love; not meaning thereby to identify God with an abstraction, but meaning (to adapt the Hermetic formula) that His 'essence' is to love.

But there is something further to be noted. All Hellenistic thought shrinks from ascribing personality to God. Though its exponents may use the language appropriate to personality, they almost always betray in the end an unwillingness to take such language with full seriousness. And in the activities which they attribute to the Divine there is nothing that logically compels us to conceive it as personal. A 'life-force' or an 'Idea of the Good' would be enough. But if the characteristic divine

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activity is that of loving, then God must be personal, for we cannot be loved by an abstraction, or by anything less than a person. Thus even in using an abstract term the writer is not reducing God to an abstraction, since he is to be understood (on the analogy suggested) as attributing to God an activity which is radically personal.

We are now in a position to say what is implied in the statement 'God is love,' over and above what is implied in the statement 'God loves.' The latter statement might stand alongside other statements, such as 'God creates,' 'God rules,' 'God judges'; that is to say, it means that love is *one* of His activities. But to say 'God is love' implies that *all* His activity is loving activity. If He creates, He creates in love; if He rules, He rules in love; if He judges, He judges in love. All that He does is the expression of His nature, which is—to love. The theological consequences of this principle are far-reaching.

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10 Verse 9 is a restatement of the great Johannine declaration of the love of God (John iii. 16) in terms differing only slightly from the form given in the Fourth Gospel. It reminds us once again that in speaking of the love of God we are thinking of loving *action*, definite, concrete and recognizable on the historical plane (see iii. 16 and notes). Verse 10 underlines one point in this declaration which is of fundamental importance: the Christian religion starts not with man's love for God, but with God's love for man, and with God's love expressed in specific action in history.

This differentiates the specifically Christian experience from all kinds of erotic mysticism, the classical expression of which is to be found in Plato's *Symposium*. Plato takes as the primitive type of love, sexual desire, which is a passionate craving for beauty. But beyond physical beauty, beyond the beauty of the mind and soul, lies Beauty itself, 'that beauty which always is, never coming into being or passing away, neither growing nor diminishing. . . . It will not be present to the imagination as a face, or hands, or anything else which is bodily; nor again as thought, or knowledge of any kind; nor does it exist in something other than itself, as in an

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animal, or in earth or heaven, or anything else; but it always *is*, itself in itself and by itself, sole and unique' (*Symp.*, 210e-211b). 'What then do we think,' he continues, 'if it should fall to the lot of a man to behold Beauty itself, absolute, pure and unalloyed . . . if he could contemplate divine Beauty itself in its uniqueness?' The answer is that 'he if any man is dear to God and immortal' (*ib.*, 211d-212a).

This aesthetic and passionate mysticism is turned by Aristotle into a metaphysical doctrine of the relation of God to the world. God is absolute Reality, and therefore changeless and unmoved. Yet He is the cause of all change and movement in the universe. But how? 'He moves the world as being the Object of its love (or desire)' (*Metaphysics*, XII. 7). Love therefore becomes a cosmic principle, and the mystical craving for union with the eternal is given a metaphysical basis. The type of religion to which this language belongs is not only Greek. It is an extremely widespread type. In such religion love is essentially the love of man for God—that is to say, the insatiable craving of limited, conditioned, and temporal beings for the Infinite, the Absolute, the Eternal. Love for man cannot be attributed to God, for the Absolute must be passionless and unmoved.

This way of thinking was certainly dominant in the religious world of Hellenism, though actual religious experience kept breaking away from it in various ways. Over against it stands the Christian affirmation: Love lies in this, not in our love for Him, but in His love for us. Appropriately, a different word is used for 'love.' In Plato and Aristotle, as in Greek religious writers usually, the word is *ērōs*, a term connoting primarily sexual desire. Here, as all through the New Testament, the word is *agapē*. The noun is scarcely found in non-biblical Greek. The verb generally has such meanings as 'to be content with,' 'to like,' 'to esteem,' 'to prefer.' It is a comparatively cool and colourless word. It is this word, with its noun, that the translators of the Old Testament used by preference for the love of God to man and man's response, and by doing so they began to fill it with a distinctive content for which paganism, even in its highest forms, had no proper expression. In the New Testament

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this fresh content is enlarged and intensified through meditation upon the meaning of the death of Christ. As Paul puts it, **God proves his love for us by this, that Christ died for us when we were still sinners** (Rom. v. 8); and our present author similarly, **We know what love is by this, that He laid down His life for us** (iii. 16: see note, pp. 84-5). The meaning of the word must in fact be understood from the Gospel itself; and the pith and marrow of the Gospel is this: **God's sending of His Son to be the propitiation for our sins**. The meaning of the word traditionally (but infelicitously) translated **propitiation** is explained in the note on ii. 2. It means that the coming of Christ, and in particular His death 'for our sins, according to the scriptures' (1 Cor. xv. 3), constitutes the means by which we are cleansed from the taint of sin, and enter into the sphere of divine forgiveness, with the newness of life that it brings. That God provided such means for us, at such a cost, indicates what is meant by the love of God.

- 11 After what has just been said, the command of love comes with greater cogency than ever. Already in iii. 16 it has been enforced by the example of Christ's sacrifice. That sacrifice has now been shown to express the 'essence' of God Himself as love. It can now be very plainly seen that the **new command** is no arbitrary or optional addition to the original Gospel (ii. 7). For the Gospel is the proclamation of the love of God—of God Himself as love—and consequently to accept the Gospel is to place ourselves under the obligation of love to our fellow men. Indeed, such love is the appointed way of communion with
- 12 God. The mystics talk of the 'vision of God,' but in fact **God no one has ever seen** (as the Fourth Gospel also declares, i. 18). We may recall that for Plato the love of divine Beauty culminates in 'beholding' it, 'absolute, pure and unalloyed.' The New Testament, however, is notably reticent about the vision of God. Here again it carries forward the thought of the Old Testament. In Hebrew religion hearing, not seeing, is the key to religious experience. Communion with God is a matter of 'hearing the word of the Lord'—that is, receiving from Him the knowledge of His will, and ordering one's life according to it. This is true blessedness: 'Blessed are they that hear the word

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of God and keep it' (Luke xi. 28). This saying of our Lord sanctions the Hebrew outlook in religion, which is also the Christian. The promise 'They shall see God' in Matt. v. 8 refers to the blessed 'life of the age to come.' In so far as the age to come has already dawned upon the world in the coming of Christ, the Fourth Gospel finds a place for the vision of God, not in the sense of mystical rapture, but in the sense that in the incarnate Christ we behold the glory of the Lord: **He who has seen me has seen the Father** (John xiv. 9). There is indeed a hint of fuller vision in the life after death (John xvii. 24), and this hint is taken up in our epistle (iii. 2; see note). But in Gospel and Epistle alike the direct mystical vision of God as a goal of religious aspiration in this life is set aside. It is the 'Word' of God that comes to us in Christ. That word is a word of love. Communion with God, therefore, is established in the act of loving. **If we love one another, then God remains in us, and love for Him is complete in us.** The last clause is virtually repeated from ii. 5. There the completion of love resides in keeping the word of God. We now know that the word of God to us is both the expression of His love for us and at the same time the command to love one another. Hence love to God, which has no meaning apart from obedience, is completed in loving our fellows.

III. THE CERTAINTY OF THE FAITH (iv. 13 - v. 13)

We now begin the third and last main division of the Epistle, which has its character from the great affirmations in which it culminates in v. 4-12. The division is not (here or anywhere else in the Epistle) clear-cut. It appears, however, that it was the author's intention to lead up to a conclusion affirming the certainty of the faith, at a moment when many minds were made doubtful or hesitant by the doctrinal disputes which had broken out; and we may mark at this point the transition to this final theme. Already in iii. 19-24 the writer had begun to speak of 'assurance' and 'confidence,' and apparently his intention was to turn at iii. 24b to the theme of the witness of the Spirit, which in the Epistle as we have it forms part of the concluding passage (v. 7). Thus the

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last main division might have been made to begin at iii. 19. But after iii. 24^b the author was diverted to the distinction between the true witness of the Spirit and its counterfeit (iv. 1-6), after which, feeling that his treatment of the theme of divine love (iii. 1-18) was not yet complete, he added a passage (iv. 7-12) which provides its indispensable culmination. This passage, therefore, cannot be separated from the second main division of the Epistle. At iv. 13 we are back at the same point as iii. 24^b, and the theme of divine love now passes (though with many backward references) into that of the certainty of the faith.

I. THE NATURE AND GROUNDS OF CHRISTIAN ASSURANCE (iv. 13-18)

- 13 This is how we may be sure we remain in Him and He in us,
14 because He has given us a share in His own Spirit; and we
have seen, we do testify, that the Father has sent the Son
15 as the Saviour of the world. Whoever confesses that 'Jesus
is the Son of God,' in him God remains, and he remains in
16 God; well, we do know, we have believed, the love God has
for us. God is love, and he who remains in love remains in
17 God, and God remains in him. Love is complete with us
when we have absolute confidence about the day of judg-
18 ment, since in this world we are living as He lives. Love
has no dread in it; no, love in its fulness drives all dread
away, for dread has to do with punishment—anyone who
has dread, has not reached the fulness of love.

We are now to have a full and final treatment of the subject which is one of the main themes of the epistles: that of union with God, expressed in terms of mutual indwelling; and, more particularly, in terms of the question (already posed and answered in various ways in ii. 5, iii. 24), how we may be sure that we remain in Him. After the disclosure of the supreme truth that God is love, it is possible at last to give an entirely satisfying answer to that question. This is how we may be sure we remain in Him and He in us—the word 'this' refers to what follows, and in the first place to the next clause—because He

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has given us a share in His Spirit—which is only a slightly expanded repetition of the statement in iii. 24. But we shall do well to regard the whole passage down to verse 16 as giving, in effect, the grounds of assurance.

The first ground, then, is the gift of the Spirit. When this 13 aspect of the Christian life was mentioned before (at iii. 24), the writer was diverted from his immediate purpose by the necessity for distinguishing sharply between genuine divine inspiration and its counterfeit. Now he restates his point positively. He does not, however, develop it, and it remains somewhat obscure. The first mention of the Spirit, in iii. 24, at once suggested to him the Spirit of prophecy, and he pursued that subject in the following verses. But it is not clear that this was his first intention. Prophecy, indeed, was for early Christians a powerful proof of the presence of God in the Church (cf. 1 Cor. xiv. 24-5). But in iii. 24 it is the individual Christian (within the fellowship of the Church) who is the subject of that union with God described as mutual indwelling; and it is of this that the gift of the Spirit is a proof. Although in the present passage the verb is plural, the reference would seem to be the same. Prophecy is after all only one of the manifestations of the Spirit, and behind all such manifestations lies the fundamental experience which is described by Paul in Rom. viii. 15-16: **When we cry 'Abba, Father!'** it is this Spirit **testifying along with our own spirit that we are children of God.** Probably, then, we are intended here to think of the 'interior witness of the Holy Spirit,' the immediate, spontaneous, unanalysable awareness of a divine presence in our life. The author is well aware of the danger of any appeal to such types of experience, and that is why in iv. 1-6 he guarded against the danger (in the special case of prophecy) by reference to the central article of the Christian creed. Similarly here, he passes rapidly from the 'interior witness' to the observable facts of the Incarnation.

Secondly, then, the 'interior witness' finds its complement 14 in the external testimony to Christ as Saviour: **We** (that is, the Church and its ministry continuing the apostolic witness to the Gospel (see pp. 9-16)) **have seen, we do testify, that the**

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Father has sent the Son as Saviour of the world. The verb 'to see' which is used here is the same as in verse 12 above, where the 'vision of God,' in the sense of 'Hellenistic mysticism,' is denied. While God in His eternal being is invisible, the Incarnate is visible, and that is sufficient to meet our
15 need for knowledge of God (cf. John xiv. 8-9). In the light, therefore, of observed facts (cf. i. 1, where again the same verb of seeing occurs) we confess the Church's faith, **Jesus is the Son of God**; and we now know (in the light of iv. 7-10) that the ultimate content of that confession is nothing less than the love of God, manifested in the incarnate life, and
16 the death, of Jesus: **we do know, we have believed** (for the same combination of verbs, though differently translated, cf. John vi. 69) **the love God has for us**. And so, finally, the truth of the divine indwelling becomes luminously self-evident: **God is love, and he who remains in love remains in God, and God remains in him**.

By thus drawing together several strands of thought which have run through the epistle, the author has produced a balanced, comprehensive and singularly impressive account of the grounds of Christian assurance. The Christian life is, to use the language of mysticism, a life of union with God, where God dwells in us and we in Him. Empirically, it is a life whose ruling motive is love to God and man. But simply to say that, is to fall short of the truth; for such love might be the expression of a natural disposition, or of an effort made from a sense of duty. A man might be said to love God because he had, what is very common, a craving for the infinite; and he might love his fellow men because he had a naturally kindly disposition, or because he acknowledged the duty of benevolence. All that is good and desirable, though the craving for the infinite sometimes takes odd ways, a philanthropy based on a sense of duty is seldom welcome to its objects, and natural kindness may break down under stress. But Christianity is more than this. It holds the belief that the love with which we love God

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and our neighbour really is the love of God (**Love lies in this, not in our love for God, but in His love for us, iv. 10**); it is a divine power indwelling, for God Himself is love. In speaking of the love of God Christianity means something quite concrete; for we confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and, having before us the way in which He actually lived and died, we recognize in that **the love God has for us**. That confession has behind it the authority of the primary witnesses, whose testimony resides in the continuous tradition of the Church from the beginning. At the same time, we do not ground our assurance solely upon external testimony, for this testimony is confirmed in experience by an inward conviction, wrought, we must needs believe, not by our own minds, but by the Spirit of God. And, yet again, our assurance does not depend solely upon such interior witness (for we might mistake the spirit of error for the Spirit of truth); it is corroborated by the objective facts of the Gospel (**14-16a**). The aphorism which follows (**16b**) resumes in compendious form the conclusions of verses 7-12: **God is love; and he who remains in love remains in God, and God remains in him**. The restatement is no mere repetition, for it is now related directly to the theme of Christian assurance which has occupied verses 13-16. We know we are in union with God, because His Spirit testifies within us. But not only so; we have external, objective evidence, in the life and death of Christ, that God loves us; that indeed the very nature and property of God is to love. Hence follows a very direct ground of assurance. To live in love is to live in union with God: and that points to the final test for the validity of all religious experience.

The expression 'to remain in love' is suggestive rather than exact. It is not clear whether the meaning is 'to continue to live as the objects of God's love,' or 'to continue to love God,' or 'to continue to love our brothers,' It is in fact impossible, according to the teaching both of this epistle and of the Fourth Gospel, to make a clear separation between these three modes or manifestations of love. The energy of love discharges itself along lines which form a triangle, whose points are God, self and neighbour; but the source of all love is God, of whom

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alone it can be said that He *is* love. Whether we love God or our neighbour, it is God's love that is at work in us—assuming, that is, that our love is that authentic *agapê* which is exemplified in God's gift of His Son, and in Christ's sacrifice for us all.

The last point is not unimportant. The famous aphorism of 16b, in its English dress, readily lends itself to falsely sentimental interpretations if it is detached from its total context. It does not mean that anyone who feels for another person any sort of liking, affection or passion, which we loosely include under the term 'love,' is *ipso facto* in union with God. The true nature of divine charity is sufficiently defined by reference to the Gospels, and it is this love, or charity, that is meant.

This closely knit statement therefore places the reality of the Christian experience of God beyond question, guarding against the dangers of subjectivism on the one hand, and of mere traditionalism on the other; placing equal and co-ordinate stress on love to God, which is the heart of religion, and love to man, which is the foundation of morality, without allowing religion to sink to the level of mere moralism, or morality to be dissolved in mysticism. The passage is the high-water mark of the thought of the epistle.

- 17 We are now led to a further development of the doctrine of Christian assurance with which the foregoing verses have dealt. We have been told that in a region where there is no direct vision (for no one has ever seen God) we can nevertheless have complete assurance that we are in union with God. We have the interior witness of the Spirit, confirming the evidence of the facts of Christ's incarnate life and death; and the essential purport of this evidence is that God loves us. That conviction, however, is ineffectual unless we 'remain in' God's love (in the complex sense already indicated). Assuming, however, that by this test **love is complete in us**, and we are thus assured that we remain in God, and He in us, then we proceed to a further consequence of this fulness of love. A literal trans-

I JOHN, CHAPTER IV, VERSES 13-18

lation will perhaps better bring out the connection of thought. 'In this fact love is made complete with us—namely that we have confidence on the Day of Judgment.' (It may be that Moffatt is right in giving the sense 'about the day of judgment'; but the preposition properly means 'in,' and it is probable that it is intended, quite simply, to indicate a point of time—namely, the now visibly impending Judgment Day.) In other words, when Doomsday comes the Christian will possess confidence before God, as the final outcome of a life lived in the love of God on earth. (For the background and meaning of the word translated 'confidence,' see note on iii. 21.) This recalls ii. 28: **Remain within Him now . . . so that when He appears we may have confidence, instead of shrinking from Him in shame at His arrival.** In both contexts the writer is speaking of that union with God which is described as mutual indwelling; but in the present passage that idea has been made more precise and perspicuous through the doctrine that God is love, so that to 'remain in God' is to 'remain in love.' Confidence on the Day of Judgment, in fact, is the ripe fruit of a life lived in the love of God—or, to put it otherwise, of a life lived in this world in conformity with the pattern of Christ. (For the suggested contrast between the absolute perfection of unity with God which belongs only to Christ in His glorified existence in the eternal world, and the relative and progressive unity which is possible for His followers in this world, see John xvii. 9-19.)

The conformity of the Christian life with the divine character as revealed in Christ is a thought never far from the writer's mind. Sometimes it is expressed precisely in terms of *imitatio Christi* (ii. 6, iii. 3, 16); sometimes more vaguely (as i. 7, ii. 29—where the sequence of thought may be compared with that in our present passage). Here the context shows that he is appealing to the example of Christ as the One of whom it can be said, without qualification, that **He remains in love and love is complete in Him.** In the Fourth Gospel we learn that Christ is in perfect union with the Father, Father and Son dwelling mutually in one another (John xiv. 10-11); and this union with God by mutual indwelling is held up as the archetype, or ideal, of the communion of the Christian

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with God (John xv. 9-10, xvii. 21-3). All this is in our author's mind when he says, in this world we are living as He lives.

If then we take the picture of Christ in the Fourth Gospel as the pattern of what it means to 'remain in love,' we can give a full and precise meaning to that expression as it is used here. The Father loves the Son and shows Him all that He is doing Himself (v. 20): in fact, it is the Father, who remains ever in the Son, who is performing His own deeds (xiv. 10) (which are deeds of love towards the world, iii. 16); in other words, Christ, as the incarnate Son of God, is the point at which the love of God operates for the welfare of men; and it is with the love of the eternal God that Christ loves His own in this world, to the end (xiii. 1). Again, by virtue of keeping God's commands, Christ remains in the love of the Father (xv. 10); which must mean that He lives with the Father in a relation of mutual love (which can also be described as mutual indwelling). Hence, to remain in love, living in this world as Christ lives, means for us that we keep our place in God's family, as the objects of His love, that we return His love in keeping His commandments, and that by exercising the divine charity towards our fellows we become points of operation for the love of God in the world.

Such is the way of living which reaches its perfection in an absolute confidence on the day of judgment: and naturally so, since it is a way of living which unites us with our Judge (John v. 22, 27; cf. 2 Cor. v. 10). But, further, since it is a life
18 within the love of God, it is exempt from fear. Love has no dread in it; love in its fulness drives all dread away. The love spoken of is mutual love between God and ourselves (with its corollary of charity towards our neighbours); but perhaps with the emphasis, in this case, upon the love we bear to God; for this seems to be implied in the negative clause, anyone who has dread, has not reached the fulness of love. It is self-evident, even in merely human relationships at their best, that the more truly two persons love one another, the less they will be likely to be afraid of one another. It is true that each may have a very real fear of hurting one another (as we should fear to affront the love of God); but not because he is afraid of what

the other may do to him. *A fortiori*, to live within the love of God is freedom from the ultimate fear.

Our author, as we have seen, carries on from the earliest days of Christianity a very vivid and forcible sense of the near approach of Doomsday (see ii. 18, and notes, pp. 48-50). As a matter of chronology, he was mistaken. History went on, and is still going on. This, however, does not alter the facts of the essential transiency of this world, and of its subjection to the judgment of God. In these times of 'crisis' (as we call them, using the Greek word for 'judgment'), when the evil tendencies resident in a whole epoch of history reveal themselves in their disastrous consequences, the awakened conscience acknowledges that the judgments of the Lord are in all the earth. Such recurrent 'crises' (whether in the history of nations or on the small stage of the individual life does not matter) are flash-lights upon the nature of our existence in this world. Our sense of living at the end of a world epoch, and of witnessing the reaction of a moral universe against the wickedness and folly of mankind, is no illusion, but one more testimony to the unescapable truth that this world comes to an end (sooner or later, and for each of us at death), and leaves us exposed to the final realities. In the end we must face the truth about ourselves and our doings, as seen through the eyes of God. If our belief is true, that our Maker is a God of righteousness, and that He has made us with a certain freedom (however relative and limited) to choose and act responsibly, then our life can hardly be said to make sense unless each of us is to be given, at some moment soon or late, an understanding of himself as he really is and of his actions as they really are; that is, as God sees them, for the interim judgments of conscience are partial and fallible (cf. 1 Cor. iv. 3-5). This is the Last Judgment we await. (It is effectively suggested in the Prayer Book version of Ps. l. 21: 'I will reprove thee, and set before thee the things that thou hast done.') However we imagine it to ourselves, it is a terrifying prospect. The dread which it awakens is described in a classical passage in the Epistle to the Hebrews: **nothing but an awful outlook of doom,**

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of that burning Wrath which will consume the foes of God . . . It is an awful thing to fall into the hands of the living God (Heb. x. 27, 31). But no Christian need, or should, feel dread like that, says our author. Such dread has to do with punishment; or perhaps his meaning is that fear carries punishment with it—is in fact punishment. The Greek would bear that sense, and it is at any rate a fact: there is hardly a worse mental torment than utter terror; and many people have felt it at the thought of judgment to come. But it is not the intention of the Christian religion that we should live in dread. For to be a Christian is to live in love, and love has no dread in it, love in its fulness drives all dread away.

2. LOVE, OBEDIENCE AND FAITH (iv. 19 – v. 5)

- ¹⁹ We love, because He loved us first. If anyone declares, 'I love
²⁰ God,' and yet hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who will not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot possibly love
²¹ the God whom he has never seen. And we get this command from Him, that he who loves God is to love his
^{v.} brother also.
¹ Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ, is born of God; and everyone who loves the Father, loves the sons born
² of Him. This is how we are sure that we love God's children,
³ by loving God and obeying His commands (for love to God means keeping His commands). And His commands
⁴ are not irksome, for whatever is born of God conquers the world. Our faith, that is the conquest which conquers the
⁵ world. Who is the world's conqueror but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?

It might seem that in these verses we are reverting to the themes of the second main division, for they are in part a résumé of what was said in iii. 11–18 and elsewhere about love to God and love to man. But all this is here recalled in the context of the theme of assurance, and with v. 3–4 the emphasis passes from love to faith, and it is this idea of the Christian faith and its irrefragable evidence that prevails down to v. 12.

I JOHN, CHAPTER IV, VERSES 19-21

The grounds of confidence on Judgment Day have been so stated that they might seem to place too great a burden on the conscience of the diffident Christian, who asks himself, 'But do I love God enough to put fear aside?' To correct any such impression, the writer repeats what he said in iv. 10 (see also notes there). The love of which he is speaking is essentially 19 the love of God for us, and our love only derivatively: **we love, because He loved us first.** 'We love,' he says: not, 'we love God because He loved us first,' though that is true; but in the widest possible sense, our very capacity to love, whether the object of our love be God or our neighbour, is given to us in the fact of our being loved by God. Thus, in facing the expectation of judgment to come, we find our real ground of assurance not in our love for God but in His love for us—in the sending of His Son to be the expiation for our sins (10); though it would be paradoxical if, being so persuaded of His love, we did not return it in a love for Him which excludes fear.

This return of love, however, must find its object also in 20 our fellow men, as our author now insists, reverting to the theme of verse 11 above (as well as of iii. 11-19, where love of our brothers is said to afford a ground of confidence before God). There is here a serious possibility of self-deception. A man may say, 'I love God,' and mean it to the best of his belief. He may experience the emotions of love to God; but love in the sense intended by this writer is not merely, not even primarily, emotion. Feelings may be delusive. The proof that love is real, in the full Christian sense, lies in the overt action to which it leads (cf. iii. 17, and notes). There is no real love to God which does not show itself in obedience to His commands (see v. 3 below); and God's command is quite explicit: that he who loves 21 God is to love his brother also. The reference is clearly to the tradition of the teaching of Jesus, as we have it in Mark xii. 28-31 and parallels. Hence the overt proof of love to God—the proof that is to convince not only observers but the man himself—lies in the practical exercise of charity towards his fellow men. Negatively, if anyone declares, 'I love God,' and yet 20 hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who will not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot possibly love the God whom

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he has not seen. The meaning of this latter clause is not quite clear. The word 'cannot' might bear either of two meanings, which may be illustrated as follows. A schoolmaster might observe to an idle pupil, 'Unless you attend to your lessons, you *cannot* become an educated man'; and, on the other hand, the recipient of an anonymous letter might remark, 'A person who writes like that *cannot* be an educated man.' Similarly, here the meaning might be either that, unless one practises himself in loving his fellows, he is incapable of the more difficult task of loving God; or that the observed absence of practical charity is a proof that a person does not love God. The context seems to demand the latter meaning; for the writer is not here concerned with the stages by which we may learn to love God, but with the tests by which it may be known whether or no we love God; and the most straightforward and convincing test is that of charity towards our neighbours. We have here in effect a fresh interpretation and application of the evangelical commandment of love to God and neighbour. For the 'first and greatest commandment,' and the second which is 'like unto it,' are in the last resort one commandment. Being the objects of God's love, we are to love our neighbour in Him and Him in our neighbour; and that is what it is to remain in His love.

- v. The intimate connection between love to God and love to
¹⁻_{3a} neighbour may be illustrated in another way. And here the writer harks back to the doctrine of divine generation from which the argument started in iv. 7. There the point was made that it is the nature and property of the child of God to love, since it is his Father's nature to do so. Here the point is made that the child of God is a person *to be loved*, because of his parentage. Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ (every true Christian), is born of God. But it is a general principle that if you love the parent you will love the child. (It is not necessary to give the word 'father' a capital letter, for the writer is enunciating a general maxim: love me, love my child; although, of course, in the application which he gives it the parent is God and the child the Christian man.) The conclusion we expect is: therefore if you love God you will love

I JOHN, CHAPTER V, VERSES 1-5

your fellow Christian. But verse 2 is not quite unambiguous. Literally translated, it would run: 'By this we know that we love the children of God when we love God and keep His commands.' The Moffatt rendering assumes that the words 'by this' refer to what follows (as in this epistle they usually do), and are explained by the words 'when we love God and keep His commandments.' This would imply that if we are uncertain whether or not we really love our fellow men, we should ask ourselves whether we love God; or, in other words, whether we keep His commandments (verse 3a): the evidence of our love to man is the fact of our love to God in the keeping of His commands. This is not the usual order of thought in the epistle. In iii. 14, 17-19, and negatively in iii. 15, iv. 20, it is suggested rather that the immediate *datum* of experience is our love to man, and from it we derive assurance of our relation to God. No doubt the author holds that love to God and love to man are so inseparable that the presence of either is evidence of the other. Yet it is a little surprising, in view of his general attitude, to find him treating our love to God as the more immediate certainty, from which we are to deduce the reality of our love to man. The words of verse 2, however, are capable of another meaning, which may be represented by a slight alteration of the order of words in English: 'By this we know that, when we love God, we love the children of God.' The words 'by this' now refer to what precedes (cf. iv. 6, iii. 19), and we have a perfectly logical argument, which may be thus stated in syllogistic form:

He who loves the parent loves the child:

Every Christian is a child of God:

Therefore, when we love God we love our fellow Christians.

This would appear to be the author's meaning. He assumes the solidarity of the family as a fact of ordinary experience, and argues directly from it to the solidarity of the family of God. To be born of God is to be born into a family, with obligations, not only towards the Father of the family, but also (as part of our obligation to Him) towards all His children. This needed saying, because for many people to be a 'child of God' meant

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an exalted spiritual status, accompanied by mystical experiences of union with the Divine, without any necessary recognition of social obligations.

- 3b The reader has just been reminded that to love God means to keep His commands. Love which does not include obedience is not worth the name. But is it not a very hard thing to keep God's commands? The Christian standard of conduct is high and exacting. Yet the Lord Himself said, 'My yoke is kindly and my burden light' (Matt. xi. 30). With this saying (we may suppose) in mind, the writer adds, **His commands are not irksome**, He does not mean that God's demands upon us are less exacting than we supposed, but that they are accompanied by the assurance of power to fulfil them. In our attempts to live according to the will of God, we have against us the powers of 'the world'—that is, of paganism, or human society organized without God, bearing the marks of the desire of the flesh and
4 the desire of the eyes and the proud glory of life (ii. 16). But **He who is within you is greater than he who is in the world** (iv. 4). When the writer last appealed to that truth, he was concerned with the victory of the Church over the forces of error outside it. Now he is concerned with an even more insidious attack of the powers of 'the world,' the attack which is delivered against the Christian man through the pressure of pagan motives and standards upon his own moral life. In face of that pressure it is still true that we have in us something which is more powerful than 'the world.' For we are children of God, and we have in us something of God Himself. The good in us is after all stronger than the evil, because it is the energy of God: **Whatever is born of God conquers the world.**

Here, then, is the way to victory over paganism, the paganism of the human heart, manifesting itself both in a godless world-order and in the power of evil inclinations, false standards and bad dispositions which we have to overcome in ourselves in obeying God's commands. The way to victory is not a confident assertion of our own better selves, but **faith**, and faith necessarily refers us to something beyond ourselves. The victorious faith of the Christian is trust in God as He is revealed in Jesus Christ His Son. It means committing our-

I JOHN, CHAPTER V, VERSES 6-13

selves to the love of God as it is expressed in all that Jesus Christ was and all that He did. Such faith in God has its 5 intellectual basis in belief in the Incarnation of the Son of God. Without that basis the conception of God as a God of love remains precarious, in face of the many facts which seem to contradict it. Granted that basis, we have a faith against which all the forces of evil in the world and in ourselves are powerless to prevail.

3. THE WITNESS TO THE FAITH (v. 6-13)

Jesus Christ, He it is who came by water, blood, and Spirit— 6
not by the water alone, but by the water and the blood.
The Spirit is the witness to this, for the Spirit is truth. The ⁷₈
witnesses are three, the Spirit and the water and the blood,
and the three of them are in accord.¹ If we accept human 9
testimony, God's testimony is greater; for God's testimony
consists in the testimony he has borne to His Son. He who 10
believes in the Son of God possesses that testimony within
himself; he who will not believe God, has made God a liar
by refusing to believe the testimony which God has borne
to His Son. And the testimony is, that God gave us life 11
eternal and this life is in His Son.

He who possesses the Son possesses life: 12
he who does not possess the Son of God does not possess
life.

I have written in this way to you who believe in the name 13
of the Son of God, that you may be sure you have life
eternal.

¹ The Authorized Version reads here: 'There are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost; and these three are one. And there are three that bear witness in earth, the spirit, and the water, and the blood; and these three agree in one.' This represents the so-called 'Received Text,' which goes back to Stephanus's edition of the Greek New Testament, 1550. The sentence about the 'Three Heavenly Witnesses' is found in no Greek MS. earlier than the fourteenth century, in no ancient Greek writer, in no ancient version other than the Latin, and in no early MS. of the Old Latin version or of Jerome's Vulgate. It is first quoted as a part of the text of 1 John by Priscillian, the Spanish heretic, who died in 385, and it gradually made its way into MSS. of the Latin Vulgate until it was accepted as part of the authorized Latin text. In the first printed Greek Testament to be

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The writer now wishes to insist upon the whole rich content of belief in the Incarnation, which is the pledge of victory over the world. He does so in terms which are obscure to us, though his first readers no doubt had the clue to his language. 6 Jesus Christ, he says, is He who came by water, blood and Spirit.¹ That He came by Spirit we can understand by reference to the evangelical tradition. The Synoptic Gospels trace the beginning of the public Ministry of Jesus to the descent of the Holy Spirit which accompanied His baptism by John (Mark i. 9-11, Matt. iii. 16-17, Luke iii. 21-2). According to Acts x. 38, this constituted the 'anointing' by virtue of which He appeared as the 'Christ' (= 'Anointed'). Again, these Gospels designate Jesus as the One who is to 'baptize with Holy Spirit' (Mark i. 8, Matt. iii. 11, Luke iii. 16; cf. Acts i. 5), and in the Acts it is He who pours out the Spirit upon the Apostles (Acts ii. 33). The Fourth Evangelist has brought these two together in a notable passage: John (the Baptist) bore this testimony also: 'I saw the Spirit descend like a dove from heaven and rest on him; I myself did not recognize him, but He who sent me to baptize with water told me, "He on whom you see the Spirit

published, that of Erasmus, 1516, the words do not appear. Erasmus was attacked for the omission, and undertook to introduce them in subsequent editions, if any Greek MS. could be produced which contained them. One of the poor and late MSS. which do contain them was produced, and, true to his word but against his own judgment, Erasmus printed them in his edition of 1522. Meanwhile, the stately Complutensian edition of Cardinal Ximenes, which gives, in parallel columns, the Greek text (printed from the most beautiful Greek fount, perhaps, ever cast) and the Latin Vulgate, had been issued (it had been in print since 1514), and this gives the disputed sentence in a Greek text differing slightly from that of Erasmus. It was retained as part of the text by Stephanus, and so passed into the Received Text. There is no doubt whatever that the words are a spurious interpolation, made first in the Latin version, and that the various forms in which they appear in Greek are all translations from the Latin.

¹ It is to be observed that the words 'and spirit' are not to be found in all our MSS., and they are omitted from the texts upon which our Authorized and Revised Versions are based. They are, however, attested by those two excellent MSS., the Sinaitic and the Alexandrine, as well as by some minor authorities. Some texts, again, seem to have omitted the word 'blood,' since the passage is sometimes cited by ancient writers in the form 'by water and spirit,' recalling the language of John iii. 5. The true text remains uncertain, but the reading adopted above, as well as being strongly attested, gives a good sequence of thought.

I JOHN, CHAPTER V, VERSES 6-13

descending and resting, that is He who baptizes with the holy Spirit." Now I did see it, and I do testify that He is the Son of God' (John i. 32-4). Here we have a 'witness' to the fact of the Incarnation, the witness of John the Baptist; but that witness rests on a prior witness of God Himself, in the descent of the Spirit (for the Baptist did not recognize Christ until the divine sign was given). It is in accord with this that our author says ⁷ that the Spirit is the witness, and (he adds) a witness to be accepted, because the Spirit is truth (cf. John xvi. 13). In history, the descent of the Spirit was evidence of the Messiahship of Jesus. In the present experience of the Church, the activity of the Spirit is evidence of His power to baptize with the Spirit, and therefore of His divine Sonship. The writer is here thinking, it is probable, not so much of the 'interior witness of the Holy Spirit,' but rather of the outward expression of that inner witness in the corporate life of the Church, and particularly in inspired or prophetic utterance (itself dependent on the 'interior witness') by which the Church proclaimed and confirmed the truth of the Gospel.

So far, then, we can follow our author's meaning. The ⁸ difficulty lies in the statement that Christ came by water and blood as well as by Spirit, and that the witness of the water and the blood is united with that of the Spirit. If we are to turn, as usual, to the Fourth Gospel for a clue, we naturally think of John xix. 34. The evangelist reports that blood and water issued from the pierced side of the crucified Jesus; and he underlines the importance of the fact by adding, He who saw it has borne witness (his witness is true; God knows he is telling the truth), that you may believe. Once again the idea of 'witness' is introduced; but it is the witness of an observer to the fact, and not the witness of the water and the blood, as here. Clearly the Evangelist attached some mysterious significance to the fact, but what the significance was he has not made clear. In view of the symbolism of the Fourth Gospel as a whole, we should think of the blood of the Son of Man which is real drink and confers eternal life (John vi. 54-5); and of the living water which Christ bestows (John iv. 14). This living water is said, according to a probable construction of John

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vii. 38, to issue from the body of Christ, and it is there equated with the Holy Spirit. All this, however, does not seem to throw direct light on our present passage, which states that Christ came by water and blood, and that the water and blood bear witness (consentient with that of the Spirit) to the truth of the Gospel, and in particular to the reality of the incarnation of the Son of God.

- 6 The author has found it necessary to insert an emphatic parenthesis: **not by water alone, but by the water and the blood.** This implies that someone taught that Christ came by water, but not by blood. If we knew what this meant, we should be well on the way to an understanding of the passage. Unfortunately, we are not sufficiently informed about the special form of false teaching attacked. It is, however, known that there were teachers of Gnostic tendencies who held that Jesus was a mere man until at His baptism the divine Christ descended upon Him; that the Christ remained united with Him during His ministry, but left Him before His crucifixion, since the divine cannot suffer. Thus through His baptism Jesus, by union with the divine Christ, was qualified to reveal divine mysteries to mankind, but since it was as mere man that He suffered, His death had no redemptive efficacy. This view might conceivably have been expressed (though we do not know that it was so expressed) by saying that Christ came by the water (of baptism) but not by the blood (of the Cross). If so, the meaning of the words **he came not by water alone, but by the water and the blood** would be tolerably clear. The Gospel affirms, upon the testimony of those who saw and heard, that Jesus Christ was both baptized and crucified, and both these facts are essential to our faith in Him, because both taken together bear the meaning that Jesus is the Christ or Son of God incarnate (iv. 2), and that as such He is the Saviour of the world (iv. 14), and not merely its Enlightener.
- 8 In what sense, then, do the water and the blood bear witness? The question may perhaps be answered by drawing an analogy with the witness of the Spirit. The Spirit is, as we have seen, both a factor in the historical life of Jesus, and a continuing factor in the experience of the Church. Similarly, the

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baptism and the crucifixion are authenticated facts in history, and as such bear witness to the reality of the incarnate life of the Son of God; but further, the Church possesses a counterpart to the baptism of Christ, in the sacrament of Baptism, and a counterpart to His sacrificial death, in the sacrament of the Eucharist. Both sacraments attest and confirm to believers the abiding effect of the life and death of Christ. It seems likely that our author is thinking of these two sacraments as providing a continuing witness to the truth of Christ's incarnation and redemptive death. Their value as evidence lies precisely in their being concrete, overt, 'objective' actions, directly recalling (or 're-presenting') historical facts of the Gospel, while at the same time they are the vehicles of a supra-historical life in the Church. As *verba visibilia*, they confirm the prophetic word inspired by the Spirit. Thus the apostolic faith is authenticated against all false teaching by a threefold testimony: the living voice of prophecy, and the two evangelical sacraments; and the three of them are in accord.

In verses 9 and following the theme of 'testimony' is further elaborated. The movement of thought becomes clearer if we refer to an important passage in the Fourth Gospel dealing with the same theme at greater length. The discourse in John v. 19-47 explains and defends the claim of Jesus to be Son of God. Briefly (we learn), it means that His every act is done, His every word spoken, in absolute dependence upon the Father and absolute obedience to His will; so that the words He speaks are God's words, and the acts He performs are 'works of God'; and these are, specifically, judgment upon sin and the bestowal of eternal life. Such a claim needs to be substantiated by independent testimony, since a man's bare assertion about himself is not valid evidence (v. 31). Accordingly, three forms of evidence are offered. First, there is the testimony of John the Baptist (cf. i. 29-34). This however is no more than an *argumentum ad hominem*, directed to those who were predisposed to give credence to the Baptist (33-5). The real testimony is that of God Himself, which is given, primarily, in two ways: in the actual effect of what Jesus did

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(36), and in the Scriptures (39). What Jesus did was manifestly the work of God, since His coming brought judgment and eternal life into the world, and God alone is the Judge and the Giver of life; and it is God who speaks in the Scriptures.

In this argument we seem to discern the lines along which Christian apologetic ran in early days. But though to the Christian believer the evidence of the redeeming work of Christ was manifest, and the corroborative evidence of Scripture seemed conclusive, the fact remained that both failed to win credence from the Jews, to whom the Gospel was first offered, both by Jesus Himself and by His first disciples. Why was this? The answer suggested in the Johannine discourse is that the unbelieving Jews have not the word of God dwelling in them ('You have not His word remaining in you,' is the literal translation of John v. 38, the language being similar to that of the Epistle, though the similarity is disguised in the Moffatt translation). They study the Scriptures diligently, but lack an inner clue to their meaning (v. 39). Thus the external testimony, of the works of Christ and of the Scriptures, remains unconvincing, because the internal testimony is lacking. It is lacking (says Jesus to the Jews) because **you do not believe him whom He sent** (v. 38), and because **you refuse to come to me for life** (v. 39). The ultimate testimony is apprehended only by the believing Christian. That is as much as to say that the claim of Christ is in the end self-evidencing. External evidence will bring a man so far, but the truth becomes luminously clear when faith ventures over the line.

Thus far the Fourth Gospel. The echoes of language make it probable that our author had that passage in mind. In any case, it provides a plain key to his meaning. The apostolic faith, he has said, is authenticated by a threefold testimony. In the ordinary affairs of life we are ready to be convinced by the testimony of an honest and competent witness. *A fortiori*, in the highest concerns of all, we must accept the testimony of God Himself; and the consentient testimony of the Spirit, the water and the blood is His testimony. For the historical career of Jesus, from the descent of the Spirit at His baptism to His

I JOHN, CHAPTER V, VERSES 6-13

death on the cross, is a revelation of God; and it is God also who speaks now in the Church, whether through the inspired word of prophecy or through the 'visible words' of the sacraments. But just as the Jews of the time of Christ remained uncon- 10vinced in face of the evidence, not only of John the Baptist, but of the Scriptures and of the very works of Christ, so now there are those who refuse assent to the strong testimony of God in history and in the experience of the Church. The writer no doubt has especially in mind those false teachers who, having been within the Church, and therefore directly exposed to the testimony of the Spirit, the water and the blood, nevertheless deny the reality of the Incarnation and the redeeming efficacy of the Cross. Such denial is tantamount to making God a liar—accusing the Truth of falsehood. The reason for their unbelief he traces to the same source as the incredulity of the Jews of Palestine: they have not the word of God abiding in them, and consequently no external testimony, however strong, will move them. On the contrary he who believes in the Son of God possesses that testimony within himself.

Finally, the essential content of the divine testimony can be 11stated very simply: God gave us life eternal and this life is in His Son. And with these words the author brings us back to the thesis from which he started: **The Life has appeared; we saw it, we testify to it, we bring you word of that eternal Life which existed with the Father and was disclosed to us (i. 2).** In the course of the epistle that central concept has been turned this way and that, illuminated from one angle and another, and 12now we are brought back to it with a clearer and fuller sense of its meaning, and reminded of the stark alternatives: with Christ, we have life; without Him we are dead.

The epistle is thus rounded off, and the author appears to have intended to wind up with the brief summary of his purpose in verse 13, recalling as it does the words with which the 13Fourth Gospel was apparently at first intended to close: **These signs are recorded so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and believing may have life through His Name (John xx. 31).** As a literary whole, the epistle must be held to be complete here. The rest is postscript.

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POSTSCRIPT

(v. 14-21)

I. ON PRAYER AND INTERCESSION (v. 14-17)

- 14 Now the confidence we have in Him is this, that He listens
to us whenever we ask anything in accordance with His
15 will; and if we know that He listens to whatever we ask, we
16 know that we obtain the requests we have made to Him. If
anyone notices his brother committing a sin which is not
deadly, he will ask and obtain life for him—for anyone
who does not commit a deadly sin. There is such a thing
17 as deadly sin; I do not mean he is to pray for that. All
iniquity is sin, but there are sins which are not deadly.

The first theme treated in the postscript is that of prayer, which received only brief mention in the body of the epistle, iii. 21-2. In reading the present passage, it will be well to keep in mind both this earlier section of the epistle, and the passages from the Fourth Gospel which were adduced in the notes on it (pp. 93-4). The writer takes up again the thought of 14 the confidence with which Christians may approach God, being assured that He hears and answers their prayers. Nothing, however, leads us to suppose that God will grant just anything we choose to ask, simply because we want it. There are limiting conditions. In iii. 22 the condition is that of obedience to God; in John xv. 7 it is that we should remain in Christ, and have his words remaining in us; in John xiv. 14 it is that prayer should be in the name of Christ. These all come to much the same thing. Similarly here, the condition is that prayer should be in accordance with the will of God. The same is clearly implied in the prayer which Jesus taught, the regulative clauses of which are, 'Thy kingdom come: Thy will be done'; and it is conclusively exemplified in His own prayer in Gethsemane. For prayer rightly considered is not a device for employing the resources of omnipotence to fulfil our own desires, but a means by which our desires may be redirected according to the mind of God, and made into channels for the forces of His will. Granted this one condition, our assurance is

absolute. We know that He listens to us whenever we ask; and that means, since the will of God is efficacious in this world, that our requests are there and then taking effect in it: **we** 15 **know that we obtain the requests we have made to Him.** The verb is in the present tense: it is not that we *shall* obtain our requests, but that we *obtain* them. The Greek is in fact even more emphatic than this: it says (literally), 'We know that we *possess* the requests we have made.' The saying of Jesus which gives authority to all our assurance is reported in Mark xi. 24 in still more emphatic terms: 'Whatever you pray for and ask, believe you *have got it*, and you shall have it.' Here is the paradox that contains the secret of prayer: that in proportion as it becomes real prayer it carries its answer within it.

The principle thus laid down is now to be illustrated from 16a the prayer of intercession for our fellow Christians. All through the epistle it is assumed that the normal condition for a Christian is one of serene enjoyment of communion with God and of filial obedience to His will. But it is recognized that this condition is liable to be interrupted by our falling from time to time into sin (see pp. 21-3). In such a case the will of God is that the sinner should be restored. He has provided in Christ an expiation for sin; Christ is our Advocate; and the Father Himself is faithful and just to forgive (i. 9-ii. 2, iv. 10). Consequently we can pray for a fellow Christian who has fallen into sin, with the knowledge that our prayer is in accordance with the will of God, and so with full assurance that our prayer is answered: **we ask and obtain life for him.**

No clearer case, it would appear, could be adduced. But the 16b writer hesitates. Is it, after all, certain that in every case it is God's will that the sinner should be restored? **All iniquity** 17 **indeed (all wrong-doing of any kind) is sin, and certainly a Christian may do wrong and recover. But there is such a thing** 18b **as deadly sin—that is to say, sin which places the sinner beyond the pale of that communion with God which (in the language of this epistle) is 'life.'** It seems that the writer is thinking of an overt sinful act or course of action, and not of an inward state of mind, for it is something that can be observed by others and known for what it is. What particular sin or

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kind of sin he has in mind is not made clear. A precise definition of 'mortal' and 'venial' sins is provided in the developed Moral Theology of the Church, but it would be an anachronism to try to apply it here. Nor do the partial parallels adduced from Judaism give much help. No doubt the category of 'deadly sin' was one well recognized by the community to which the epistle was addressed. In the Epistle to the Hebrews we are told that those who deliberately and defiantly repudiate their Christian faith are incapable of restoration, like Esau, that 'profane person,' who **got no chance to repent though he tried for it with tears** (Heb. vi. 4-6, xii. 16-17). It would seem likely that our present author too is thinking of apostasy or denial of Christ as the sin that places a man beyond the pale. We know that he traced the presence and power of Antichrist in the denial of the Incarnation (iv. 2-5); and if a man had become identified with Antichrist it was perhaps natural to feel that he was past praying for.

Besides, the writer may well have thought that he had warrant in the teaching of Jesus Himself for this stern conclusion. We have seen that his words about the sin of denying Christ in ii. 22-3 probably rest upon a reminiscence of the saying variously reported in Mark viii. 38, Matt. x. 32-3, Luke ix. 26, xii. 8-9. Again, he has said that to deny the truth which is attested by the Spirit is to make God a liar; and tradition reported a saying of Jesus, variously given in Mark iii. 28-9, Matt. xii. 31-2, Luke xii. 10, to the effect that blasphemy against the Holy Spirit was an unpardonable sin. If our author believed that he had before him a case to which these Gospel sayings directly applied, he may well have concluded that it was idle to pray for one who had thus sinned unpardonably, and whom Christ Himself denied before the Father.

It will be observed that the argument here turns upon inferences and probabilities. The writer, addressing readers who would know what he meant, has not made himself explicit to us. On the main point, however, his meaning is hardly doubtful, in spite of the efforts of some commentators to soften it. He does not indeed expressly forbid prayer for one who is in deadly sin, but he emphatically

I JOHN, CHAPTER V, VERSES 14-17

discourages it. Again, he does not expressly say that such a sin places a man beyond redemption, but only a clear conviction that such was the case would justify his exclusion from the prayers of the Church.

The questions of the forgiveness of post-baptismal sin and of the restoration of the lapsed continued to agitate the minds of Christians for generations. The decision ultimately went in favour of the milder view, which admitted the lapsed to penance. The general sense of the Church has not endorsed the view that we are competent to decide that a given person has sinned himself beyond the pale of the divine mercy, and consequently is past praying for. (The matter is discussed historically in K. E. Kirk, *The Vision of God*: see especially pp. 221-9, and his observations on our present passage, pp. 161-2.) It was not for nothing that the Church which preserved in its tradition the severe saying of the Lord about the sin of denying Him, also preserved the story of Peter's denial, of Christ's prayer for him, and of his ultimate recovery (Mark xiv. 66-72, Luke xxii. 31-4, John xxi. 15-17).

It may be that our author was misled by a too rigorous exegesis of the sayings of Jesus; it may be that he has misapplied them under the tension of a situation of extreme peril to the Church. In any case, it seems clear that it was with reluctance that he felt obliged to admit a qualification which really weakens the force of his affirmation about prayer and its answer. Upon the ground of the general teaching of the Gospels, and of the New Testament as a whole, and in agreement with the general sense of the Church, we may take leave to accept the affirmation and to ignore the qualification. We cannot think that it can ever be contrary to the will of Him who came to call sinners to repentance that we should pray for even the worst of sinners (who may after all be—ourselves). If we have in mind any case where, to our limited view, such a prayer seems unlikely to be answered, we may recall what Jesus said when a man had refused what looked like his only chance of salvation—**For men it is impossible, but not for God; anything is possible for God** (Mark x. 27).

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2. THE GREAT CHRISTIAN CERTAINTIES (v. 18-21)

- 18 We know that anyone who is born of God does not sin; He who was born of God preserves him, and the evil One never catches him.
- 19 We know that we belong to God, and that the whole world lies in the power of the evil One.
- 20 We know that the Son of God has come, and has given us insight to know Him who is the Real God; and we are in Him who is real, even in His Son Jesus Christ. This is the
- 21 real God, this is life eternal. My dear children, keep clear of idols.

Turning away now from the gloomy contemplation of an unpardonable apostasy, the writer comes back to the positive certainties of the faith, which he sums up in three aphorisms, each beginning with a confident 'We know.'

- 18 First, we are (as he has constantly affirmed, see ii. 29, iii. 1-10, iv. 7, v. 1-4, and notes) God's children, born of Him, belonging to Him as members of His family; and God's children, having within them the divine seed which is the word of God (iii. 9), do not live in sin (the tense of the verb here implies this continuance, see notes on iii. 9). They may from time to time be in danger, but the Son of God *par excellence*, the eldest Brother of the family (cf. Rom. viii. 29), is there to preserve them. Hence the Enemy of mankind, who holds sway over unredeemed human nature (cf. ii. 15-17, and notes), cannot make them his prey.

Put in these general terms, the maxims may pass through our minds almost as Christian commonplaces. But for the writer 'the world' meant precisely that organized pagan society in which he and his readers had to live. In its idolatry, its violence, its corruption he, like other Christians of his time, recognized the actual manifestation of the devil himself, the spirit of evil. To lose vital contact with the means of grace afforded by the fellowship of the Church was to expose oneself to the immediate peril of falling into his power. The line between Christianity and paganism, between the Church and
19 the world, was absolute. This absolute opposition is expressed

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in the second of the three aphorisms: **We know that we belong to God, and that the whole world lies in the power of the Evil One.**

To cross the line in the one direction was to pass from death to life (iii. 14); to cross it in the other direction was to pass from life to death. To yield to pagan standards was to make the passage; to compromise with paganism was a breaking down of the defences. Consequently the Christian's tenure of 'life,' threatened as it was at every point by the forces of death, would have been precarious from moment to moment but for the assurance that the whole power of God was exerted for his defence. The conflict presented itself to the Christian of the first century in desperately concrete terms. If for us the situation is for the present in some measure disguised, in the last analysis it is the same, and the assurance that we need, and are given, is the same.

The third aphorism brings us back to the ground of this ^{20a} assurance: the Son of God has come and has given us insight to know Him who is the Real God. It is upon the historical fact of the coming of Christ that our faith is founded; but its significance reaches beyond the merely historical: it gives knowledge of that which transcends history; of that which is 'real' in the full sense of the word; or, rather, of Him who is the final Reality. The full weight that here attaches to the word *real* can best be appreciated if we recall that the religious quest of the ancient world had become more and more, under the influence of Platonic teaching, an attempt to escape from the illusions of this transitory world into communion with the world of eternal reality. Christian teachers in the Gentile world were quick to see that their Gospel was directly relevant to this quest, and could readily be stated in its terms. The revelation of God which they found in Jesus Christ was a revelation of the Real, over against the illusions of idolatry. Accordingly, our author, who is about to warn his readers to **keep clear of idols** (verse 21), lays stress here upon that aspect of the Incarnation in which it is a way to knowledge of the Real. Nor is this mere knowledge in the sense in which we know objects external to us. It is the knowledge which is

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communion. In so far as we are (in the familiar Pauline phrase) 'in Christ,' we are in Him who is real.

To a Greek reader of the first century this was as much as to say that Christianity possessed that which was the goal of his own religious quest. What would surprise him would be the way by which the Christian teacher declares this goal to be attained. Most religious teachers and prophets of the time agreed in recommending a *via negativa* by which the soul was gradually detached from the world of ordinary experience and concentrated more and more upon the highest abstractions, till it could dwell upon pure Being, eternal, changeless, undifferentiated, and free from all particularity. This was what was implied by knowledge of God, or of the Real, in much of the highest religious thought of the time. The Christian Gospel, on the other hand, affirmed that such knowledge is given by the Son of God who came to earth in the flesh—that is to say, in an actual, historical human life. The world of our ordinary experience is consequently no longer a realm of mere illusion, but is capable of becoming a means of communion with the highest realities. That the Christian faith is thus rooted in the concrete, the actual, the historical, has been a constant theme all through the epistle. Now at the end the author emphasizes the other side: it is at the same time concerned with the supra-historical, the eternal, the ultimately real.

206 **This**, he adds, is the real God. In strict grammar, the word 'this' should refer to the last person named. Some commentators accordingly take the sentence we are considering to mean, 'This Person, namely Jesus Christ, is the real God.' It is more likely that the word 'this' has a wider and vaguer reference. The writer is gathering together in his mind all that he has been saying about God—how He is light, and love, how He is revealed as the Father through His Son Jesus Christ; how He is faithful and just to forgive our sins; how He remains in us—and **this**, he adds, is the real God, the one eternal Reality of which the mystics talk, though they do not know Him as He is known through Christ. And **this**, he also adds (meaning now the *knowledge* of the Real God of which he has just spoken) is eternal life. For illustration of this we need only recall

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John xvii. 3: This is life eternal, that they know Thee, the only real God, and Him whom Thou hast sent, even Jesus Christ. But it is also worth while to recall that the maxim that eternal life comes by knowledge of God, or of the Real, was a religious commonplace of the time. The new thing distinctive of Christianity is the revelation of God *in a human life*, with all that that involves.

The proper contrast to the Real is idols. The Greek word *eidōla* (21) always carries with it the suggestion of unreality. Plato used it for the illusory phenomena or appearances which he contrasted with the eternal and immutable 'ideas' or 'forms.' In the Greek Old Testament the same word was adopted to designate the images worshipped by the heathen, as being counterfeit gods over against the one real God. In this sense it was taken over by Christianity. The warning **keep clear of idols** no doubt means 'avoid any contact with paganism.' Not perhaps that the readers would be likely deliberately to take part in idolatrous rites; but where pagan practices penetrated every aspect of social life it was easy for Christians to follow ways of accommodation that might insensibly lead them into harmful compromise. Moreover, our author has in view a movement among professing Christians advocating a far-reaching accommodation, if not with actual idolatry, at least with pagan ways of thought incompatible with true Christianity. It is probably this movement that he has in view here as elsewhere in the epistle: and by idols he means not only images of the gods, but all false or counterfeit notions of God such as lead to the perversions of religion against which he has written.

It is in this sense that his warning is apt to our own situation. In our time there have appeared within what was once Christendom movements using the language of religion and offering God-substitutes—that is, idols—in the place of the living God of Christian revelation. Some of these idols of our time have shown themselves, by their fruits, to be no better than the abominations of the heathen which the Hebrew prophets denounced. It is no longer plausible either to hold that a man's theology—that is, his thought about God—does

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not matter; or to pretend that there is no great difference between the Christian faith and any sort of religiosity that may appeal to this man or that. Christians believe that the God revealed in Christ and attested in the Scriptures is the one real God, and the worship of any God-substitute is idolatry. The issue is defining itself clearly in terms of contemporary history. It behoves the individual Christian to be on his guard against any such God-substitute, whether it be a political idea, or some fashionable cult, or merely the product of his own 'wishful thinking.' The safeguards which this epistle recommends are, to live within the fellowship of the Church, and to adhere loyally and with understanding to the authentic tradition of the apostles; keeping always in view that which the apostles attest, and which creates the fellowship of the Church—the historical revelation of God in the life and words of Jesus Christ. To put it briefly for our own situation: a concentration upon the New Testament, and the Gospels in particular, in the context of a living Church fellowship, is our best safeguard against modern idolatries.

THE SECOND EPISTLE OF JOHN

EPISTOLARY INTRODUCTION (1-3)

The presbyter, to the elect Lady and her children whom I love 1
in the Truth (and not only I but all who know the Truth)
for the sake of the Truth which remains within us and will 2
be with us for ever: grace, mercy, peace will be with us 3
from God the Father and from Jesus Christ the Son of the
Father, in truth and love.

The manner in which the epistle opens is based upon the current epistolary style of the time, which is well represented by the opening of 3 John; but while 3 John is quite obviously a genuine personal letter, which would not be out of place (in spite of the difference of subject) in any collection of private correspondence of the first or second century, these opening verses have an elaborate solemnity of phrase which, at the outset, suggests that we are dealing with a different type of composition.

As in the Third Epistle, the writer does not give his name, 1 but calls himself simply 'The Presbyter.' On the meaning of this, see note on 3 John 1. The recipient is denominated by a form of words capable of more than one construction. In view of the fact that general epistolary usage would lead us to expect a proper name, it has been suggested that the words should be translated (as they well might be), either 'to the lady Electa' or 'to the elect Kyria.' The former suggestion, though it has some ancient support (see p. xiii), is on all grounds improbable. In favour of the alternative suggestion it may be urged that Kyria (= 'Lady,' like Martha in Aramaic and Domna in Latin) is a well-attested proper name, and that the epithet 'elect' with a proper name is to be found in an epistolary greeting in Rom. xvi. 13 (though the Moffatt translation disguises it). If we are to find a proper name at all, then Kyria has the preference.

But is it really credible that the epistle is addressed to an individual? The Lady (we learn) is beloved, not only by the

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Presbyter, but by all true Christians everywhere. She has many children; some of them live with her, and are joined with her in the Presbyter's greeting; others he has met elsewhere; *some* of them are good Christians, others, possibly, not. In addition, the Lady has a sister and a family of nephews and nieces residing, it would appear, at the place from which the letter is written. Yet of all this large family, no single name is mentioned; there is no allusion which would serve to bring any of them before us as individuals; and of all the reflections and injunctions contained in the epistle, there are none which seem relevant to the special situation of an individual or a family. All this stands in marked contrast to the Third Epistle. There, in spite of its brevity, Gaius, Diotrophes and Demetrius stand before us as individuals; the relations of the Presbyter to them are intelligible; the reflections and injunctions are such as to apply to these particular individuals in that particular situation, and to no others. In short, it has all the marks of a piece of actual correspondence between two individuals. Precisely these marks are absent from the Second Epistle.

The probability is that the elect Lady is a disguise for a community. If this appears to us somewhat far-fetched it must be remembered that the personification of cities, countries and provinces in female form was a well-established convention. In the art of the time the city of Rome appears as a stately woman crowned (the original of the less flattering portrait in Rev. xvii. 4). The 'Britannia' of our pennies is the direct descendant of the personified province of Britain on Roman coins. The coins which celebrate Titus's victory over the Jews show a mourning woman, with the inscription, 'Captive Judaea.' This chimes in with a usage familiar among the Jews themselves, amply illustrated in the Old Testament and elsewhere. Thus, 'the daughter of Zion' frequently personifies the Jewish people. In Isa. liv we have a sustained passage in which the holy nation is figured as wife and mother, and the members of the nation as her children. Similarly, in Baruch iv.-v. Jerusalem is the mother who bewails the calamity of her children, and is comforted with the promise of their restoration. This usage was easily transferred to the Christian

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Church. In Gal. iv. 21-31 the present Jerusalem is in servitude with her children, while the free city, Jerusalem on high, is the mother of all Christians. The elect Lady and her children form a similar figure. Some ancient commentators took her to stand for the catholic Church. This however does not seem possible. The catholic Church has no 'sister.' We conclude that the elect Lady with her children is a local church with its members; and her 'sister' is another such local church—that, namely, in which the Presbyter is residing. There is a close parallel in 1 Pet. v. 13, where Moffatt boldly, and rightly, gives the sense in the words, *your sister-church in Babylon*, but the literal rendering is: 'she in Babylon who is elect together with you.'

Why was this mystification adopted? The possibility should perhaps not be excluded, that, in the unfavourable situation of Christianity at the time (see 1 John iii. 13), it was judged safer, in case a document implicating the Church should fall into hostile hands, that it should appear to be a harmless letter to a friend. It is possible that the names of the writer and of the church addressed are omitted for similar prudential reasons—though both may have appeared, for all we know, on the outside of the postal packet, according to custom. On the whole it seems likely that the device is little more than a 'conceit,' conforming to the taste of the period. However that may be, the fiction is kept up all through: the language is such as might be addressed to a pious matron, but it is a thin disguise for a pastoral epistle to a Christian congregation.

The Presbyter first assures the church of his love for its members. The expression 'whom I love in truth' might, in another author, mean no more than 'whom I regard with sincere affection' (see note on 3 John 1). But the emphatic repetition of the word 'truth' in different connections within the same context suggests that it is being used with a more special meaning. In these epistles 'truth' is not merely, as in ordinary speech, that which corresponds with the facts, but also, specifically, the ultimate Reality as revealed in Christ (cf. 1 John ii. 21, iii. 19, iv. 6, v. 7). And so, in the present passage, *all who know the Truth* are the whole body of believing Christians. Having responded with faith to the revelation

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in Christ, and accepted the obligations it imposes, they possess, through that revelation, saving knowledge of God (cf. 1 John ii. 3-5). Similarly, the Truth, which is the Word of God, **remains within us** (2) as a perpetual source of enlightenment and moral power (cf. 1 John ii. 14, 24, and notes on ii. 20, 27, iii. 9). The Truth, or the Word of God, comes to us, not only as Gospel, but as Commandment (cf. 1 John ii. 7-8); and the content of that commandment is love or charity (cf. 1 John iii. 23, iv. 11-12). Thus the expression, '**whom I love in the Truth,**' probably conveys the idea that the love which the Presbyter has for members of the church is not merely the natural affection of ordinary human friendship, but that divine charity which, as it is God's gift to us in Christ, is also the proper relation of Christians one to another. This same divine charity, he adds, unites the congregation to which he writes with all Christian believers, in the fellowship of the
2 catholic Church. Within that fellowship all Christians love one another for the sake of the Truth—that is, the Word of God in Christ to which they are all committed.

This reiterated emphasis upon the Truth, as directing and controlling the entire system of Christian attitudes and relationships, clearly reflects the writer's concern about the inroads which 'the Lie' is making upon the fellowship of the Church (cf. 1 John ii. 21-4). There is, for him, no real charity, no Christian fellowship in the proper sense of the term, which does not rest upon a sincere acceptance of the Christian faith in its totality. The false doctrines which are going about are undermining, whether their authors mean it or not, the very foundations of the Christian life. He addresses himself to those who because they are firm in loyalty to the Truth know what Christian charity is.

- 3 The epistolary address should, according to the practice of the time, lead up to a greeting. The customary, and indeed almost invariable, form of greeting in secular correspondence of the period is not found in the New Testament except in two epistles: Acts xv. 23, James i. 1. Elsewhere we have a Christian adaptation of it; usually 'grace and peace to you,' or (in the two Epistles to Timothy) 'grace, mercy and peace.' The latter

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form is adopted here, but with a curious variation. Instead of expressing a *wish* that God should grant grace, mercy and peace to his correspondents, the writer turns it into a *promise* or *assurance* of these divine blessings to all Christians: Grace, mercy, peace, *will be with us* from God the Father and from Jesus Christ the Son of the Father; and he adds, in truth and love, because the grace of God is shown in that revelation of Himself which is the Truth, and in the divine charity expressed in the work of Christ (1 John iv. 9-10); and takes effect in the true belief and mutual charity of Christians.

THE CHRISTIAN LIFE (4-6)

I was overjoyed to find some of your children leading the true 4
Life, as we were commanded to do by the Father. And 5
now I entreat you, Lady—not as though I were writing you
any new command, it is the command which we have had
from the very beginning—let us love one another. To live 6
by His commands, that is what love means: and the com-
mand is, live in love as you have learned to do from the
very beginning.

In correspondence of the time it was a familiar (and very 4
natural) custom to begin a letter by expressing the writer's
pleasure at hearing good news of his correspondents (for some
examples, see note on 3 John 3). Following this custom, the
Presbyter expresses his pleasure at finding that some members
of the church to which he writes are leading a truly Christian
life ('walking in the Truth' is the literal rendering of his words;
the meaning of which should be clear in view of the note on
'truth' above), and so fulfilling God's commandment through
Christ (cf. 1 John iii. 23). Significantly, it is some only of whom
this is true: the church is divided.

To this church, already suffering from internal troubles, 5
the Presbyter appeals to renew and maintain the threatened
fellowship by the exercise of Christian charity. In doing so, he
adds, he is not laying upon them any fresh obligation; for
charity is an essential part of the original and unchangeable
Christian Gospel (see 1 John ii. 7-8, and notes). To live in

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6 charity is to live in obedience to the command of God in Christ, and without such obedience there can be no real Christianity (see 1 John ii. 3-5, iii. 11-18, v. 3, and notes).

FALSE TEACHERS AND HOW TO TREAT THEM (7-11)

7 I say this, because a number of impostors have emerged in the world, men who will not acknowledge the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh; that marks the real 'impostor' and
8 'antichrist.' Watch yourselves; you must not lose what you
9 have been working for, but gain your full reward. Anyone who is 'advanced' and will not remain by the doctrine of Christ, does not possess God: he who remains by the doctrine of Christ possesses both the Father and the Son. If
10 anyone comes to you and does not bring this doctrine, do
11 not admit him to the house—do not even greet him, for he who greets him shares in his wicked work.

7 The Presbyter now comes to the immediate purpose of his writing. His correspondents should know that a widespread movement of heretical propaganda is afoot, and may at any time reach their city. The expression *have emerged in the world* is a paraphrase of the Greek, which, literally translated, runs, 'have gone out into the world.' The paraphrase may give the sense which the author intended; but the literal rendering as it stands seems to yield a perfectly straightforward meaning (cf. 1 John iv. 1 and note). The heretics have 'gone out into the world' in the sense in which that expression is often used of the missionary work of the Church, after the model of Mark xvi. 15 (where the language is similar, though a different verb is used). That is to say, they have set on foot a general appeal to the public, and especially to the pagan public (which was for an early Christian 'the world' in a special sense). That they were in fact carrying on a highly successful mission we learn from 1 John iv. 5 (see note there). From their own point of view, they were Christian missionaries. From the standpoint of the Presbyter they were impostors, because the doctrines they taught implied a denial of fundamental articles of the faith. Indeed, anyone who is guilty of such denial is not

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only an impostor; he is antichrist (see 1 John ii. 18, iv. 3-6, and notes).

The error of the false teachers is described in words which are not entirely free from ambiguity. In any good Greek writer we could hardly help taking them to mean, 'They do not acknowledge that Jesus Christ *is coming* (i.e. will come) in the flesh' (whereas in 1 John iv. 2 we have the past tense: '... that Jesus Christ *has come* in the flesh'). If this is the meaning, we should have to suppose that the error of the false teachers touched the Church's hope of the second advent of Christ, upon which the First Epistle lays some stress (see 1 John ii. 17-18, 28, iii. 2, iv. 17). It may be that in this period of ferment there was controversy upon the question whether the second advent, like the first, was to be 'in the flesh'; but if so, it has left no clear trace in our sources (*Epistle of Barnabas*, vi. 9, which is sometimes cited as a parallel, is nothing of the kind, as any attentive reader will see). We shall perhaps do best to assume that our writer is not skilled in the niceties of Greek idiom, and to understand the present passage in the light of the First Epistle. The heresy is that of denying the reality of the Incarnation; denying, that is to say, that the eternal Christ, the Son of God, ever really lived a human life in history. This denial was an element in a very widespread and influential 'reinterpretation' of Christianity in early times (see Introduction, p. xix, and notes on 1 John ii. 18-23, iv. 1-6). If it had prevailed, the distinctive character of the Christian religion would have been fatally obscured. To lose hold upon the true 8 humanity of the Saviour, we are reminded, would be to reduce the Christian life to frustration (cf. also 1 John i. 1-3, iv. 14-16).

The heretics no doubt spoke of their doctrine (with some 9 pride) as 'advanced.' The Presbyterian retorts that it is possible to 'advance' so far as to be quite outside the boundaries of genuine Christian belief. What signifies is, not to exploit Christian ideas in the spinning of able and brilliant speculations, but to possess God (cf. 1 John ii. 23) or, in other words, to maintain fellowship with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ (1 John i. 3); and such fellowship cannot be maintained

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without loyalty to the fundamental truths of the Gospel. Where that loyalty exists, it is possible (as indeed the example of 1 John shows) to embark upon far-reaching re-interpretations of Christian doctrine, and in doing so to enrich its content without obscuring its central purport. It must, however, be admitted that the writer has incautiously expressed himself in terms which might seem to stigmatize any kind of 'advance' as disloyalty to the faith, and so to condemn Christian theology to lasting sterility. This extreme position has not in fact been taken by any of the great Christian communions, however strongly they have emphasized the necessity of maintaining the faith which has once for all been delivered to the saints (Jude 3).

¹⁰
¹¹- The Presbyter is not sure whether this dangerous propaganda has yet reached his correspondents, but he will instruct them what course to take in case one of its agents should approach them. If they find that any travelling missionary is bringing a doctrine different from that doctrine of Christ in which they have been instructed, he is to be treated as excommunicate. No true believer must allow him to 'darken his door.' If he meets him in the street, he must not even speak the conventional word of greeting. The separation between heretic and true believer is complete and final.

These instructions contemplate primarily the arrival of a travelling missionary (like those of 3 John 5-8, only on the wrong side) from some other place. Such missionaries depended upon the support and hospitality of Christian brethren in each place to which their mission took them. To deny them all hospitality was an effective way of frustrating their attempts at propaganda. But there is more in the boycott than this. **He who greets the heretic shares in his wicked work;** and, conversely, to send him to Coventry, pointedly and publicly, is to range yourself decisively on the side of orthodox belief. It is the intense seriousness of the crisis in the Church that leads the Presbyter thus to insist that all who accept his authority shall declare themselves unmistakably against the heretical movement, by joining in the boycott.

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This 'short way with dissenters' strikes a harsh note in our ears. To ostracize people whose opinions we dislike is natural enough, but to find it recommended as a Christian duty is another matter. In this country we have not yet had (in recent times) experiences tragic enough to give us an understanding of the situation in which the *Presbyter* writes. But suppose the Church was struggling for its very life in a paganized society; and suppose people calling themselves Christians, and using the language of Christianity, were propagating doctrines which caricatured its creed, parodied its worship, and perverted its moral standards. Many devout Christians in Germany, both Catholic and Evangelical, have seen the contemporary situation in their own country in just that way. If we could imagine ourselves in such a situation, we could better understand this fierce intolerance. We could understand better such a story as that which is told of the amiable and saintly Polycarp. Marcion, now a heretic, met him and asked, 'Do you recognize me?' 'I recognize Satan's firstborn,' was the reply (*Irenaeus, Adv. Haer.*, III. 3. 4). There is a similar story told of 'John, the disciple of the Lord,' who may have been the author of this letter. One day he was at the public baths when the heretic Cerinthus came in. He leapt out of the bath unwashed, crying, 'Let us hurry away lest the building collapse on us, because Cerinthus, the enemy of the truth, is here!' (*Irenaeus, loc. cit.*). We observe that he was not disturbed by the presence of the usual pagan crowd of bathers. It was the traitor in the camp, the 'impostor,' whose mere proximity was dangerous. Such stories belong to a situation of extreme danger to the Church. How near it actually came to being overwhelmed by a plausible and pseudo-Christian theosophy, we do not now know exactly. There are hints that at one time it was touch-and-go. The *Presbyter* and other responsible leaders had grounds for thinking that neighbourly tolerance might easily pass over into harmful compromise, and compromise end in apostasy. It is possible that the boycott of heretics was the only policy that could have succeeded in preserving the distinctive witness of the Church.

It is possible. Yet we must doubt whether this policy in the

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end best serves the cause of **truth and love**, upon which our author lays such stress. Does truth prevail the more if we are not on speaking terms with those whose view of the truth differs from ours—however disastrous their error may be? And if the norm of charity, as the First Epistle so eloquently sets forth (1 John iv. 7-11), is the love of Christ, who died for our sins—and **not for ours alone but also for the whole world** (1 John ii. 2)—is it possible to exclude from its operation even the most obdurate heretic?

We have observed that the Church has not, in the long run, maintained the teaching of the First Epistle that certain sinners are past praying for (see 1 John v. 16-17, and notes). We may similarly decline to accept the Presbyterian's ruling here as a sufficient guide to Christian conduct. In any case, emergency regulations (such as this is) make bad law. And the spirit which in the hour of stress led to the boycott of heretics, declined only too readily into the spirit of persecution when orthodoxy came to command temporal power.

But if we take the responsibility of rejecting the Presbyterian's ruling upon this point as being incompatible with the general purport of the teaching of the New Testament, and not really consistent with teaching of these epistles themselves, we must not in doing so evade the sense of urgency in witness to the truth that lies behind it, for that is something that always belongs to the situation of the Christian Church in the world. A good-humoured tolerance which is more than half indifference does not meet the seriousness of that situation, and is in any case not likely to maintain itself under the strain of divergent convictions upon questions which touch our emotions. The problem is to find a way of living with those whose convictions differ from our own upon the most fundamental matters, without either breaking charity or being disloyal to the truth. A genuinely Christian tolerance must rest upon a profound understanding of the meaning of **truth and love** as disclosed to us in Christ. If the Presbyterian fails to command our full assent to his practical policy, he has given us the indispensable starting-point for any discussion of the problem, in his insistence upon these two fundamentals, and upon their

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inseparable unity in the Christian revelation and in the living of the Christian life.

EPISTOLARY CONCLUSION (12-13)

I have a great deal to write to you, but I do not mean to use paper 12 and ink; I hope to visit you and have a talk with you, so that our joy may be complete.

The children of your elect Sister greet you.

13

The Presbyter has much more to say, but prefers to leave it 12 for a personal interview with his friends when he visits them in the near future. But if he had already written 1 John, in which these themes are discussed at length, why did he not enclose a copy, or (if his correspondents had already seen it) at least make a reference to it? Or are we to suppose that 1 John was written to churches which he found himself unable to visit at this time? We have no material for answering these questions, but the raising of them should forestall any too confident dogmatism about the inter-relations of the Johannine writings. It may be that the apology for brevity of the letter is little more than common form. We may, however, take it for granted that the Presbyter really is looking forward to a visit which will give an opportunity of personal discussion of this thorny situation, so that our joy may be complete—an expression which, in view of 1 John i. 4 (see note) and John xv. 11, xvi. 24, probably means more than the simple gratification which naturally comes from the reunion of old friends.

The letter ends with greetings from members of the Christian 13 congregation in the place from which the Presbyter is writing.

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EPISTOLARY INTRODUCTION (1-2)

The presbyter, to the beloved Gaius whom I love in the Truth.
Beloved, I pray you may prosper in every way and keep
well—as indeed your soul is keeping well.

The letter begins after the conventional manner of the time (see examples quoted below). It is, however, an exceptional feature that the writer, instead of giving his name, calls himself here (as in 2 John 1) 'The Presbyter.' This has no parallel in the New Testament, and it would be difficult to cite a precise parallel from known Greek correspondence of the period. It may be that the circle of Gaius and Demetrius had the habit of calling their revered leader 'The Presbyter' and nothing else, and that he has adopted their practice in writing to one of his adherents. But in what sense is the term to be understood? The word 'presbyter' means, in itself, no more than an 'elderly man.' We could imagine Gaius and his friends speaking among themselves of 'The Old Man,' and, perhaps, the old man accepting the affectionate nickname; but it would be difficult to conceive him using it in a formal pastoral letter to a Church, as we have it in the Second Epistle. We may in all probability rule out this explanation of the term. Equally improbable would be the suggestion that it is used in the technical sense which it bore in the early Church (after Jewish precedent) as the title of one of the board of Elders who ministered as rulers and teachers of a local congregation. The authority with which our author speaks is more than local. It appears, however, that another quasi-technical use of the term was current for a short time, mainly or even exclusively in the Province of Asia—the home, to all appearance, of our Presbyter. Christians of this province seem to have spoken of 'the Elders' (Presbyters) in referring to a group of teachers who formed a link between the apostles and the next generation (Eusebius, *Eccl. Hist.*, III. 39. 3-4). 'The Elders, disciples of the Apostles' is the formula in Irenaeus (who came from the

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Province of Asia: *Adv. Haer.*, V. 36, cf. V. 33. 3). They were apparently a small group; and it was quite possible for one of them to be spoken of, in appropriate circumstances, as 'The Presbyter.' Irenaeus, for example, several times refers to things which he had learned from 'The Presbyter,' or 'The Presbyter, the disciple of the Apostles,' without naming him (*Irenaeus, op. cit.*, IV. 47. 1, 49. 1, I. 8. 17; Eusebius, *op. cit.*, V. 8. 8). Papias, also a provincial of Asia, refers to 'The Presbyter' (Eusebius, *op. cit.*, III. 39. 15), meaning, apparently, the Presbyter John, whom he distinguishes from John the Apostle. It is probable that the term is here being used in a similar way. As Irenaeus spoke of his early teacher, who had transmitted to him the apostolic traditions, so Gaius and Demetrius spoke of *their* teacher, the man who stood to them for the authority of the Apostles, as 'The Presbyter,' simply. He need not have been, and probably was not, the same person as Irenaeus's 'Presbyter.' He need not have been, though he may have been, the same as Papias's 'Presbyter John.' In any case, we must suppose that he held so outstanding a position among Christians of the province of Asia, as a mediator of the apostolic tradition, that he could write, whether to an individual adherent or to a local congregation, under the title 'The Presbyter,' without feeling the necessity of adding his name.

Of the recipient of the letter, who bears the exceedingly common name of Gaius, we know nothing but what may be inferred from the letter itself. It is indeed stated in the *Apostolical Constitutions* (VII. 46. 9) that he was ordained by John as bishop of Pergamon. There is nothing unlikely about it, but the document is late, and there is no early support for its statement. From the letter itself we deduce that Gaius was a leading member of some unnamed Christian church in the province of Asia. He may or may not have been one of its clergy. In any case, he possessed influence, and some means, since he is expected to give generous support to travelling missionaries (verses 5, 6). He is a faithful adherent of the Presbyter in the unhappy disputes that were troubling the church. The Presbyter claims him as his 'child' in the faith (verse 4), which

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possibly implies that he had been the means of Gaius's conversion, and in any case that he stood in a special pastoral relation to him.

In place of the customary greeting (for which see note on John 3) the Presbyter sends his love: **To the beloved Gaius whom I love in the Truth.** The turn of phrase might in another author mean no more than 'whom I love sincerely.' In very similar terms an Egyptian farmer writes, in a letter of A.D. 110, 'Greet all who love you truly,' and in another letter, 'Greet Epagathus and all who love us truly' (Grenfell and Hunt, *Fayyum Papyri*, Nos. 118, 119). Even in the present letter, if it stood alone, we should not necessarily read anything more into the expression. But in 2 John 1 the word 'truth' does seem to bear a pregnant meaning (see note there), and since it is throughout these epistles a word of far-reaching significance, we should perhaps understand the Presbyter here also to be reading a deeper meaning into a conventional phrase. In sending his love to Gaius he is not simply expressing the affection of ordinary human friendship; he is giving utterance to that divine charity which, as it is God's gift to us in Christ, is also the proper relation of Christians one to another in the fellowship of the Church.

The courtesy formula, 'I pray that you may keep well,'² seems to have come into vogue during the first century, and is extremely common in letters of that period. (For examples, together with some other varieties of the formula, see Moffatt Commentary, *Romans*, p. 6). The Presbyter expands the current form slightly and writes, **I pray you may prosper in every way and keep well.** The word translated prosper literally means 'to have a good journey,' but as there is no suggestion in the letter that Gaius is travelling, we may fairly take it metaphorically, especially in view of the turn given to it in the next clause, where the same verb recurs: 'as indeed your soul is prospering' (for so it should be rendered: the Moffatt translation, **as indeed your soul is keeping well**, which would presuppose the repetition of the other of the two verbs, is perhaps due to inadvertence). The Presbyter, who, as we shall see, highly approves of Gaius's line of action in a very trying situation, is satisfied that

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he is 'having a fair journey' spiritually; he hopes that his temporal affairs may be no less prosperous.

GAIUS AND THE TRAVELLING MISSIONARIES (3-8)

- 3 For I was overjoyed when some brothers arrived and testified to the truth of your life, as indeed you do lead the true Life;
4 I have no greater joy than to hear of my children living in
5 the Truth. Beloved, you are acting loyally in rendering service to the brothers and especially to any who are strangers; they have testified to your love before the church.
6 Pray speed them on their journey worthily of God;
7 they have started out for His sake and declined to take
8 anything from pagans; hence we are bound to support such men, to prove ourselves allies of the Truth.

3 In correspondence of the time it was a familiar (and very natural) custom to begin the main part of a letter by expressing the pleasure of the writer at hearing good news of his correspondent. Thus, a letter written between A.D. 70 and 80 begins, 'Chaeremon to his dearest Apollonius, greeting. I received your note of the (?) th. inst., in a damp condition. On reading it, I rejoiced that you were well, with all your family, for I make this a matter of prayer' (Bror Olsson, *Papyri aus der frühesten Römerzeit*, No. 43: my translation). Again, we have an expression almost identical with the Presbyter's, in a letter written in the reign of Claudius (A.D. 42-54), which may be quoted in full as a typical example of a private letter of the first century, with several points of similarity to 3 John (Teres is having alterations done to his house, and Capito is supervising the work on his behalf).

'Capito to his dearest Teres, many greetings. Before all things I was overjoyed, upon receipt of your letter, that you are well, and have found your wife and child in good health. About the dining-room, I shall of course do exactly as you wish. I have undertaken to do all, if not more than all; for I am deeply interested and set great store by your friendship. You will find that all the instructions you gave me in

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your letter have been accomplished. Indeed, I hope that when you come you will find even more accomplished. I am most grateful to Primus and Tycharius, because they attend to your instructions and assist us. The plasterers have done, and are doing, all the work in polychrome. About the veranda, write me what you intend, since you are renovating it. What would you like there—pictures of the Trojan War, or what you will? The place requires something. Farewell. Sertorius and his people greet you. Greet all your family' (*op. cit.*, 34: my translation).

The Presbyter too has been made happy by good news of his ³⁻friend. He has recently been visited by certain Christian 'brothers,' who brought him the assurance of Gaius's complete loyalty, in a situation where many proved disloyal. The Presbyter, conscious of a pastoral responsibility for the churches within his sphere of influence, is above all things anxious that his children shall live in the Truth—that is to say, shall hold the full Christian faith, follow the teaching and example of Christ, and adhere to the fellowship of the Church. In some quarters he sees the faith perverted, the Christian way of life dishonoured, and the fellowship broken. Consequently, he is overjoyed to hear that Gaius at least leads the true life. He can still be counted on.

He has given especial proof of his loyalty by the service he ⁵has rendered to these brothers—strangers as they are (for the language of the original makes it perfectly clear that the term 'strangers' is a further description of the same persons as those called 'brothers'—'strangers as they are' would be a fair rendering). They do not belong to the same locality as Gaius, and upon the conventional human level they have no claim upon him. But they are 'brothers,' as being fellow members of the Christian Church. Gaius has fully recognized this claim, and has shown his loyalty to the Church (as well as to his spiritual 'father,' the Presbyter), by offering them hospitality, as they themselves testified before the church—that is, the Christian congregation in the place of the Presbyter's residence. Here was downright proof that Gaius practised that

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charity, or love, which is the mark of the Christian life.

6 The Presbyter has now a request to make. The brothers, we learn, have set out upon a journey in the cause of Christ. They are, in fact, Christian missionaries. Following the directions which Christ gave to His apostles (Mark vi. 8-9, and parallels) 7 they have set out without providing money for their journey, relying upon such support and hospitality as they may receive on their way. They conscientiously refuse, however, to take anything from pagans. We should bear in mind that the wandering preacher was a familiar figure of the times. Devotees of various religions tramped the roads, extolling the virtues of the deity of their choice, and collecting subscriptions from the public. Thus a 'slave' of the Syrian Goddess has put on record (in an inscription cited by Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East*, pp. 108 sqq.) how he travelled in the service of his 'Lady,' and 'at each journey brought back seventy bags.' (His collecting-bag is the same, in Greek, as the wallet which is forbidden to the apostles in Mark vi. 8.) The Christian missionary must not be confused with these 'begging friars.' We may perhaps read between the lines that there were Christian missionaries who had no scruples about accepting contributions towards their expenses from well-disposed pagans, but the Presbyter's friends are praised because they refuse to do so: they will accept nothing but what is given in Christian fellowship, as an expression of brotherly charity. Consequently, they are entirely dependent upon the generosity of their fellow Christians, and Gaius is asked to provide on a liberal scale for the expenses of their mission. The word which 6 is translated *speed them on their journey* is something like a technical term of early Christian missions. It occurs also in Acts xv. 3, xx. 38, xxi. 5, Rom. xv. 24, 1 Cor. xvi. 6, Tit. iii. 13. A comparison of these passages shows that while the actual meaning of the verb is no more than 'to speed a person on his way' (colloquially, 'to give him a send-off'), it had come to imply the assumption of financial responsibility 8 for the journey. This is what is asked of Gaius. The Presbyter adds that in thus defraying the expenses of missionaries *we prove ourselves allies of the Truth*, inasmuch as we collaborate

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in the dissemination of the Christian message, which is the truth of God revealed in Christ.

THE RECALCITRANCE OF DIOTREPHES (9-11)

I have written to the church: only, Diotrephes, who likes to take 9
the lead among them, repudiates me. So when I come, I 10
shall bring up what he is doing, babbling against me with
wicked words—and, not satisfied with words, he refuses to
welcome the brothers, checks those who want to welcome
them, and excommunicates them from the church.
Beloved, do not imitate evil but good; he who does good 11
belongs to God, he who does evil has never seen God.

The Presbyter now passes to a less agreeable topic—the 9 opposition to his authority which has developed in some unnamed church. **I have written to the church**, he says; Gaius will know at once which church is meant. It might seem natural to suppose that he was one of its members. But if so, it is difficult to see why it should be necessary to give him information about the proceedings of the rebellious party in it. We may perhaps take it that Gaius was not a member of the offending congregation, but possibly a neighbour, and in any case acquainted with its situation, though not with the latest developments of it. At this point the Presbyter takes up his tale. He has written a letter to the church, upon a subject which Gaius will readily divine without being told.

It is tempting to assume (as many commentators do) that this letter is our 2 John; but upon consideration the assumption is not very probable, since there is nothing in the present letter to connect it with the doctrinal controversy with which 2 John is concerned. It would seem more natural to suppose that it dealt, like the letter to Gaius, with the business of the travelling missionaries. We might reasonably conjecture that the Presbyter had appealed to the church to welcome the missionaries and help them on their way, but the appeal had been rejected; or, it may be, he had reason to fear that it would not even be brought before the church; and that is why he now writes to Gaius, upon whose support he can count. The

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centre of the opposition is one Diotrephes, who likes to take the lead among them. Diotrephes repudiates the Presbyter, babbling against him with wicked words. But apparently he is in a position to do more than make abusive speeches. It may be that he was able to prevent the Presbyter's letter from reaching the church. At any rate, he refuses to welcome the brothers, he puts obstacles in the way of those who would welcome them, and he goes so far as to excommunicate the party favourable to them. It would indeed be possible to soften the import of the words by giving to the Greek verb a 'conative' sense: 'he is for excommunicating them,' 'he moves for their excommunication.' Or, again, it is possible that the words, which might be literally rendered, 'he throws them out of the church,' are not to be understood as implying formal excommunication, but mean that Diotrephes used physical violence to exclude his opponents from the church-meeting. It seems, however, most natural to understand that Diotrephes either possessed, or arrogated to himself, the authority to excommunicate, and exercised it effectively. This authority belonged, so soon as the monarchical episcopate was fully established, to the bishop. Whether the church to which Diotrephes belonged already possessed a fully episcopal constitution, we cannot say. The churches of this region are represented in the Acts of the Apostles and the Pastoral Epistles as governed by a board of presbyters, who might also be called bishops (Acts xx. 17, 28, Tit. i. 5-9). In the Ignatian Epistles (about A.D. 115) they are governed by bishops, assisted by a board of presbyters. At what stage this church stood at this moment, we do not know. All we can say is that Diotrephes acted in the capacity of a bishop, as understood from the second century onwards. But what was his actual position? There seem to be three possibilities: either (i) he was the acknowledged bishop of the church, pursuing a policy hostile to the Presbyter; or (ii) he was one of the board of presbyters who, by force of character, or by successful demagoguery, overrode his colleagues; or (iii) he was a layman, who had usurped quasi-episcopal functions. The Presbyter regards him as nothing but an ambitious demagogue. From his point of view

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at least, Diotrephes was no bishop. In any case, however, he must have secured the support of a majority of the congregation; else we should have been told, not that he excommunicated persons from the church, but that he separated from the church with his followers (like the false teachers of 1 John).

The exact conditions governing the appointment of ministers in the sub-apostolic period are obscure. Clement of Rome appears to state the general view at the close of the first century when he describes the presbyter-bishops of Corinth as 'established by the apostles, or in the meantime by other competent persons, with the consent of the whole church' (1 Clem. xliv. 3). His letter, however, shows that there was a party at Corinth which took the view that the consent of the church might be withdrawn, and the existing ministry might be superseded by popular choice. It may be that Diotrephes and his party took a similar view. The Presbyter (if we have rightly identified him as one of the group which perpetuated the apostolic tradition at one remove) naturally stood for the element of apostolic authority in the appointment of ministers (the element for which Clement also contends against the refractory Corinthians). The period was one of transition. In the foreign missions of the Church at the present day it is a familiar observation that a time arrives when the control of the foreign missionary, accepted without question in early days, begins to chafe the indigenous church, as it grows in numbers, experience and self-consciousness. A phase of tension sets in, which, if development is healthy, ends in the graceful withdrawal of the foreign missionary in favour of the local indigenous ministry. It is probable that a similar phase of tension arose in the sub-apostolic Church. The Apostles in their lifetime had enjoyed an almost unquestioned authority, based not merely upon their personal prestige, but upon their unique position as personally commissioned by the Lord. Their successors for a time seem to have assumed a similar undefined authority. The Pastoral Epistles assume that Timothy and Titus would exercise a supervision of ministerial appointments and other ecclesiastical concerns, over a whole province, as wide and unquestioned as Paul himself had exercised. When,

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however, the church emerges from the 'tunnel' (see p. xviii), in the course of the second century, there are no Timothys and Tituses visible. The apostolic authority is now assumed to be transmitted, in some sense, through the succession of local bishops, who are not as yet under any 'metropolitan' control.

There must therefore have been a stage at which the authority of local ministers was growing at the expense of the waning authority of 'apostolic men,' like our Presbyter. It is likely enough that this stage was marked by some tension. Ageing men do not always yield with good grace an authority which under changed conditions they can no longer exercise effectively. Younger men, conscious of the growing needs and opportunities of a fresh generation, are not always considerate in grasping powers which are their due. It may well be that this letter reflects such a stage of transition and perhaps of tension. But if so, there are two different ways in which the situation might be construed.

It may be (i) that Diotrephes is in fact the first 'monarchical bishop' known to history in the province of Asia; one of a board of presbyters who, with large support from the laity, made himself what the bishop was to become, and flouted the obsolescent authority of a substitute-apostle. In that case we should conceive the Presbyter as the last champion of a lost cause, and his opponent as the pioneer of a new order which prevailed.

On the other hand, it may be (ii) that Diotrephes is a symptom of the disease which the quasi-apostolic ministry of monarchical bishops was designed to relieve. When the prestige of apostolic authority at a remove, in the persons of the Timothys and Tituses and their peers, declined, the very vigour and independence of the growing local congregations offered an all too tempting field to the ambition of able individuals. It seems clear that the danger which this state of affairs threatened to the unity and continuity of the Christian Body was one motive in the development of the catholic episcopate during the second century. If this view be taken, we shall conceive the Presbyter as confronting at an early stage the threat of disunion and anarchy in the Church, which was to occupy the energies of its leaders for a long time to come.

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It does not appear that there was any question of doctrine involved. Diotrephes is not charged with heresy. He may, of course, have been suspected of a leaning to the false doctrines denounced in 1 and 2 John; but if so, the Presbyter would surely have mentioned the fact; he is not wont to be mealy-mouthed when heresy is concerned. It is, to all appearance, purely a question of order and discipline. The measures he takes are tentative. First he appeals to the personal loyalty of those who still acknowledge his authority. Then he proposes to visit the church, and to expose (presumably in the presence of the congregation) the misdemeanours of Diotrephes. The language which he uses—**When I come, I shall bring up what he is doing, babbling against me with wicked words**—suggests that the Presbyter is not too sure of his ground. He can do no more than stake his personal influence and prestige against those of Diotrephes. Whether his appeal succeeded, we are not told; but the very fact that his letter is preserved tells, so far, in favour of the view that it did. But that was hardly a final solution. The problem, as we have seen, was ultimately solved by the development of the catholic episcopate. It may be that the traditions which make 'John' the principal organizer of the episcopate in the province of Asia refer to our Presbyter and not to the Apostle. It may even be that he himself appointed Gaius as bishop, in accordance with the tradition preserved in the *Apostolic Constitutions*. But there is no suggestion of this in the letter, and conjecture is not profitable.

In verse 11 we have what looks like a purely general maxim; 11 but we are probably safe in understanding that the evil example is that of Diotrephes, who out of personal ambition hinders the work of Christian missions, tyrannizes over his fellow members of the congregation, interrupts communications between the congregation and its apostolic pastor, and flouts and slanders the Presbyter himself. All this constitutes a flagrant example of breach of fellowship and denial of charity. This example Gaius must on no account imitate. To **do good** (that is, before all things, to exercise charity, see notes on 1 John ii. 7-11) is the mark of one who belongs to God. Here the language of the First Epistle is echoed. A reference to 1 John ii. 3-5, iii. 4-10,

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iv. 7 *sqq.*, and notes, will serve to illustrate what the writer means by 'belonging to God' and 'seeing God.' To put it briefly, there is no 'religious experience' which can rightly be called Christian unless it attests itself in the practice of Christian charity. Diotrephes, for all his ability and powers of leadership, has shown himself no Christian. Gaius must not follow his bad example. (Was he tempted to throw in his lot with the majority?) There are better examples for the Christian to follow.

A TESTIMONIAL FOR DEMETRIUS (12)

12 Everybody testifies to Demetrius, and so does the Truth itself:
I testify to him too, and you know my testimony is true.

12 A third name is now introduced, that of Demetrius. Who he was we do not know. According to the *Apostolic Constitutions*, *loc. cit.*, he was appointed by John to be bishop of Philadelphia, but there is no early support for the statement. Conjectural attempts to identify him with Demetrius the silversmith of Ephesus (Acts xix. 24) or with Paul's unsatisfactory assistant Demas (Col. iv. 14, Philem. 24, 2 Tim. iv. 10) are little better than trifling. It may be that he was a member of the disturbed congregation or of that to which Gaius belonged; and at a time when there were cross-currents, and personal loyalties were uncertain, the Presbyter wished to assure Gaius that he was to be trusted. Or it may be (and this seems more probable) that he was one of the travelling missionaries, perhaps their leader. A likely suggestion is that he was the bearer of this letter, which introduces him to Gaius and the loyal minority, and serves as his credentials. Commendatory letters (or certificates, as the Moffatt translation has it, 2 Cor. iii. 1) played an important part in the life of the early Church, as we can well understand in the circumstances of the time. We have an example of such a 'certificate' in Rom. xvi. 1-2. In Col. iv. 7-8 Paul introduces Tychicus, the bearer of the letter, as a faithful minister and fellow-servant in the Lord, who will be able to give the Colossians accurate news of him. Similarly, it may be, the Presbyter entrusts Demetrius

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with the delivery of his letter, and guarantees him as an entirely trustworthy person. **Everybody testifies to Demetrius**, he writes. By way of comparison (and contrast) we may take the language of a letter written in 13 B.C. by a freedman to his patron, who (he complains) has been listening to slanderous tales about him. 'I believe,' he writes indignantly, 'that I do not deserve to be insulted, as your friends will testify to you. I have done you no wrong, and your friends will not think it right for me to be insulted when I am meeting your claims' (Olsson, *Papyri aus der frühesten Römerzeit*, No. 9: my translation).

Everybody testifies to Demetrius, and so (continues the Presbyter) **does the Truth itself**. The latter phrase is remarkable. Its exact meaning is not altogether clear. The words, in another author, might be no more than a strong affirmation that the common opinion of Demetrius is the plain truth about him, and it may be that no more is intended here. But in these epistles we must always suspect that the word 'truth' has some more special meaning. It is indeed an unlikely suggestion that **the Truth** is here personified, and identified with God, with Christ, or with the Holy Spirit (in spite of John xiv. 6, 1 John v. 6). **The Truth**, in the language of these epistles, is the revelation of God in Christ. This revelation is appropriated by Christian faith, and embodied in Christian living. The Presbyter speaks of his 'children' as **living in the Truth**. Similarly, the First Epistle speaks of **practising the Truth** (1 John i. 6). As thus practised, the Truth becomes a matter of direct experience and observation, and provides a guarantee of the Christian standing of him who practises it. It may be that this gives the meaning of the expression in the present verse. The Truth itself testifies to Demetrius in the sense that his whole way of life so manifestly embodies the Christian ideal (as we might put it) that no one who is acquainted with him needs any further testimony. The Truth shines by its own light in all his actions.

The Presbyter, however, wishes to make it clear that he takes personal responsibility for his guarantee of Demetrius's soundness. No doubt Gaius will be impressed by the fact that

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Demetrius is generally esteemed, and in time he will appreciate the self-evidencing integrity of his life; but meanwhile it will mean more to him that the Presbyter, whose judgment he is accustomed to trust, pledges his word in Demetrius's favour: **I testify to him too, and you know my testimony is true.** The phrase recalls the formula with which the Fourth Gospel is accredited in the editorial note appended to the last chapter (John xxi. 24). Who the 'we' are who thus attest the truth of the Fourth Gospel, we cannot say; but they were certainly not far removed from the circle of our Presbyter. Might we conjecture that he was himself the editor who wrote the note when the Gospel was published with its appendix?

EPISTOLARY CONCLUSION (13-15)

13 **I had a great deal to write to you, but I do not want to write to**
14 **you with ink and pen; I am hoping to see you soon, and we**
will have a talk.

15 **Peace to you! The friends salute you: salute the friends**
one by one.

¹³⁻
14 In conclusion, the Presbyter apologizes for the brevity of his letter. He will be seeing his correspondent before long. Such apologies were more or less common form; but in this case it may well be that there were delicate matters to discuss which the Presbyter preferred to leave to a personal interview.

15 The greeting, **Peace to you!** was adopted by Christians from Jewish usage (cf. 1 Pet. v. 14). For the rest, the greetings follow the general model of contemporary correspondence. For example, in a first-century letter found at Oxyrhynchus we have 'Greet Ptolemas and all your people one by one' (*Oxyrhynchus Papyri*, II. 298: my translation); and in a second-century letter written from Rome: 'I send many greetings to your wife, and to Serenus, and to all who love you, one by one' (Milligan, *Select Greek Papyri*, No. 41: my translation). It is therefore quite beside the mark to infer (as some have done) that the party of the Presbyter was so small that it could (so to speak) be counted on one hand. His intention is simply to individualize for the recipients a courtesy which in writing must needs be left general.

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